

WILHELM GROENER, OFFICERING, AND THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN

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By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the career and attitudes of Wilhelm Groener (1867-1939), whom it uses as a vehicle for understanding the Imperial German army officer corps and the assumptions that guided the General Staff war planning process that culminated in the Schlieffen Plan and the German invasion of Belgium and France in 1914.

Part I addresses the relationship between social background and officering. An influential body of historiography portrays the officer corps as noble-dominated, atavistic, and unprofessional. Groener is usually portrayed as an exception to the rule, but this dissertation shows that while his career was exceptional, it was not anomalous. Moreover, his cultural orientations comported with those of his superiors. This circumstance did not amount to his “feudalization”, however, because he continued to exhibit bourgeois cultural orientations (“Bürgerlichkeit”). Yet if his career shows that we can no longer accept the venerable “feudal” interpretation of the officer corps, it also points to the limitations of the competing functional interpretation. Groener’s military professionalism can only be understood in

connection with the culturally specific image of war that manifested itself in the Schlieffen Plan.

Part II addresses the relationship between Groener's concept of officering and his image of war. It asks why Groener found Schlieffen's military thought so compelling, even after the First World War, when he had spent time trying to manage Germany's material and manpower shortages. In order to answer this question, this dissertation also addresses the Schlieffen Plan debate that Terence Zuber has initiated. Zuber claims that Groener and other prominent Schlieffen advocates "invented" the Schlieffen Plan after losing the war in order to protect the General Staff's reputation. Groener's antebellum attitudes towards war and his references to Schlieffen's teachings and "plan" already in the opening months of the Great War show that Zuber is wrong. Groener's image of war comported with the revised and nuanced view of the Schlieffen Plan that Terence Holmes and Robert Foley have put forth in response to Zuber's challenge. It was also consistent with the image of military culture that Isabel Hull offers.

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Introduction

The history of the Wilhelmine army officer corps is usually told in two disconnected stories. On one hand, the officer corps was allegedly aristocratic, atavistic, and unprofessional. On the other hand, it was supposedly the most professional officer corps in the world, so tightly focused on battlefield success that it spawned the infamous Schlieffen Plan that informed Germany's lightning invasion of Belgium and France in 1914.¹ This dissertation tries to ameliorate this apparent schizophrenia by bringing both stories into a common narrative. It does so by following the Wilhelmine career of one officer, Wilhelm Groener, with particular focus on his understanding of officering, war planning, and the Great War.

Born into humble circumstances in southwest Germany in 1867, Groener pursued a remarkable career in Imperial Germany's preeminent military institution, the Great General Staff.² In 1912 he assumed leadership of the Railroad Section, which planned for the complex

1. "Whenever historians and social scientists talk about the military as a profession, they talk about Prussia, but this Prussia has the irritating quality of changing every time it is discussed." Michael Geyer, "The Past as Future: The German Officer Corps as Profession," in *German Professions, 1800–1950*, ed. Geoffrey Cocks and Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 183. Further discussion and detailed citations of the historiography in question appear below in Chapters 1 and 2.

2. Johannes Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener: Reichswehrminister am Ende der Weimarer Republik (1928–1932)* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1993), 5–21; *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, s.v. "Groener" (by Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen).

mobilization and deployment of Germany's "army of millions." At war's begin, in August 1914, he became Chief of the Field Railways and obtained far-reaching powers over all military and civilian rail traffic. At the fulcrum of Germany's military operations and its industrial and agricultural production, Groener traveled between the fronts and homeland, and he worked with military, government, and business leaders. He thereby gained insight into the war's myriad links among armed combat, agricultural and industrial production, public opinion, and politics. When in 1916 Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff assumed leadership of the German armies and wanted to maximize Germany's industrial output, they turned to Groener, the "Organizer," to head the newly created War Office.³ In this position he negotiated with business and labor leaders, as well as politicians from the entire breadth of the Reichstag's political spectrum. After criticizing the excessive profits of manufacturers in 1917, he fell out with Ludendorff, because the latter saw organized labor as a key hindrance in war production. He next served on the Western Front as a divisional and then corps commander, after which he became Chief of Staff to Army Group Eichhorn in Ukraine. He replaced Ludendorff as First General

3. "Der 'Organisator' Groener," *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (3 Aug. 1920), in Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg i.Br. (BA-MA), N46/28, fol. 8; Gerald D. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor, 1914-1918* (1966; Providence: Berg, 1992).

Quartermaster on October 29, 1918, after Ludendorff suddenly acknowledged Germany's hopeless military situation and demanded that the government immediately seek terms. Groener's new assignment gave him operational control of the German armies under the command of Hindenburg, but continuing the war was no longer an option. After informing the kaiser that the troops would not follow their sovereign into a German civil war in defense of the Hohenzollern monarchy, Groener guided the officer corps and army through revolution into the nascent Weimar Republic.⁴

He retired from military service the following autumn, the object of rancor from the far-left and far-right. Independent Social Democrats and Communists recalled his imperious call to workers in 1917: "a cur [*Hundsfott*] whoever strikes when Hindenburg needs weapons!" They accused the "Cur General" of joining the "counterrevolutionary" Majority Social Democrats in 1918 to crush the revolution.⁵ Ultra-nationalists and

4. Gerhard W. Rakenius, *Wilhelm Groener als Erster Generalquartiermeister: Die Politik der Obersten Heeresleitung 1918/19* (Boppard a.R.: Boldt, 1977); Ulrich Kluge, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/1919: Staat, Politik und Gesellschaft zwischen Weltkrieg und Kapp-Putsch* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 138–58; Ekkehart P. Guth, *Der Loyalitätskonflikt des deutschen Offizierkorps in der Revolution 1918–20* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1983).

5. *Der Dolchstoßprozess in München, Oktober–November 1925: Eine Ehrenrettung des deutschen Volkes: Zeugen- und Sachverständigen-Aussagen: Eine Sammlung von Dokumenten* (Munich: Birk, 1925), 200; "Eine stets aktuelle Erinnerung," *Die Rote Fahne* (22 Nov. 1927), in BA-MA, N46/28, fol. 44; Max Seydewitz, *Es hat sich gelohnt zu leben: Lebenserinnerungen eines alten Arbeiterfunktionärs*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1976), 2:84.

inveterate monarchists saw Groener as the weak, treasonous “Revolution General,” who had sent the German emperor packing and negotiated with Social Democratic revolutionaries.⁶

Like so many generals of the old army, Groener had trouble coming to terms with the past. He participated in acrimonious debates over the German war effort and became a prominent defender of General Staff war planning and the feasibility of its operational concept for the 1914 offensive through Belgium, the so-called “Schlieffen Plan.”⁷ Unlike many of his former comrades, however, he did not seek relief in radical right-wing politics. Nor did he turn to the Stab-in-the-Back Myth, the notion that Germany’s armies were victorious in the field but defeated by treasonous political enemies at home.⁸ If he was unable to embrace Weimar party politics, he at least accepted the new republic and served it as Minister of Transportation (1920–23), Minister of Defense (1928–32), and acting

6. “Der Abschied des ‘Revolutionsgenerals,’” *Die Berliner Redaktion* (22 Sept. 1919), in BA-MA, N46/28, fol. 3; see also fols. 20, 22, 45; Max Bauer, *Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat: Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Osiander, 1922), 36, 123, 133–34, 168, 178–79, 255, 265, 268–74.

7. Wilhelm Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme: Rückschau und Ausblick* (Berlin: Georg Stilke, 1920); Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen: Operative Studien über den Weltkrieg* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1927); Groener, *Der Feldherr wider Willen: Operative Studien über den Weltkrieg* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1930); Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg: Die amtliche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914–1956* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002), 314–16.

8. *Der Dolchstoßprozess in München*, 198–227; Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik*, 271–74.

Minister of the Interior (1931–32)—without belonging to any political party.⁹ He even defended it from its most extreme right-wing political enemies, albeit by resorting to the Pandora’s box of rule by presidential decree. He was persona non grata to the Nazis, but they left him to his quiet retirement in Potsdam. He died of natural causes in 1939, shortly before a younger generation of General Staff officers put into practice the operational concepts he had so stridently advocated.

Wilhelm Groener’s career in the Wilhelmine army officer corps raises two historiographical paradoxes. First, he was a Swabian from the lower-middle class in what the historiography usually portrays as a Prussian-dominated, aristocratic officer corps. Why was he able to climb so high? Was he an exception to the rule? Or does his career pose a fundamental challenge to the historiography? Second, Groener experienced the Great War from vantage points that offered deep insight into its complex dependencies on military operations, domestic and international politics, and industrial and agricultural production; nonetheless, after the war he doggedly defended Alfred von Schlieffen’s narrow operational teachings. Why? Why did so many General Staff officers share his views?

9. Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener*.

This study was originally motivated by the possibility that Groener's social background mediated his image of war, but it has found no demonstrable causal links between the two.¹⁰ They were indirectly related by the common bond that they shared with Groener's concept of officering, but Groener's professionalism was so strong that they otherwise remained two distinct elements in the larger story of his military career. Hence, this dissertation is divided into two parts.

Part I, "Social Background and Officering," explores the relationship among Groener's social background, career, and professional self-concept in the prewar era. Chapter 1, "Making an Officer," asks whether Groener's career was a fluke for a man of his social background, or whether it was part of a broader pattern. Chapter 2, "The Right Stuff," explores the relationship between Groener's social background as a commoner and his self-concept as an officer.

Part II, "Officer and Image of War," turns to the problem of Groener's understanding of war. Within the contemporary context of changing military conditions and the current historiographical debate about

10. Suggestions that such a link might have existed: Ulrich Trumpener, "Junkers and Others: The Rise of Commoners in the Prussian Army," *Canadian Journal of History* 14 (1979): 29–47; Roger Chickering, "Der 'Deutscher Wehrverein' und die Reform der deutschen Armee, 1912–1914," *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 25 (1979): 7–35; Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 73 ("a new dynamic"), 79.

the Schlieffen Plan, Chapter 3, “Mastering the Future,” addresses what kind of war Groener was expecting. Chapter 4, “1914,” analyzes the emergence of Groener’s famous Schlieffen Plan advocacy and critique of Moltke in autumn 1914, as he experienced the army’s mobile operations in Belgium and France. Chapter 5, “Lessons of War,” examines how Groener interpreted the failure of Moltke’s 1914 plan to win a war on two fronts. It focuses on the two major components of his postwar analysis of what had gone wrong: on one hand, Germany’s fragmented civilian and military leadership, on the other hand, the army’s culpable inability to realize Schlieffen’s plan.

Ideally these two parts would be linked up in a third that brings together social background and military professionalism during and after the war, when Groener became a major figure in domestic German politics. This goal has proven impracticable for a single dissertation, because it requires analysis of bureaucratic and political developments between 1916 to 1932 that would have doubled this study’s size. Moreover, this period of his life has received significant historiographical attention.¹¹ By leaving

11. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*; Rakenius, *Wilhelm Groener*; Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich: A History of the German National Railway*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 1:19–64; Michael Geyer, *Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit: Die Reichswehr und die Krise der Machtpolitik 1924–1936* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980); Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener*; Robert M. Citino, *The Evolution of Blitzkrieg Tactics: Germany Defends Itself against Poland, 1918–1933* (New

aside these better-known elements of Groener's story, this dissertation is able to provide a closer reading of Groener's Wilhelmine professional self-concept and image of war than otherwise would have been possible.

Before jumping into the story, a note about the broad relevance of Groener's unique life is necessary. Some argue that insights gained from Groener's career cannot be applied to the officer corps as a whole, but such criticism misses the point.¹² This dissertation does not claim that Groener was a "typical" officer (if such a man ever existed). Instead it uses the particularities of Groener's varied career as a gateway to the class and military cultures in which he lived and worked.¹³ It builds a bridge towards

York: Greenwood, 1987).

12. See Heinz Reif, "Einleitung," in Heinz Reif, ed., *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000–01), 2:9–10, and Volker Ackermann, review of *ibid.*, vol. 2, in *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte Online* (July 2002), <http://library.fes.de/fulltext/afs/htmrez/80373.htm>, both of whom criticize the significance that I attribute to Groener in Stoneman, "Bürgerliche und adlige Krieger: Zum Verhältnis zwischen sozialer Herkunft und Berufskultur im wilhelminischen Armee-Offizierkorps," in Reif, *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland*, 2:25–63.

13. Edward Hallett Carr writes, "man . . . is moulded by society just as effectively as society is moulded by him. You can no more have the egg without the hen than you can have the hen without the egg. . . . It is not that the view of man as an individual is more or less misleading than the view of him as a member of the group; it is the attempt to draw a distinction between the two which is misleading." Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 39, 57–58. See also Aletta Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond," in *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), esp. 84–94; Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1977); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973).

a new interpretation, but it does not claim to provide that interpretation, for whose foundation we first need more specialized research.

Part I

Social Background and Officering

The son or grandson of the former noncommissioned officer can no doubt make it to higher civil servant or officer.

Otto Hintze (1911)*

*“Der Beamtenstand,” in *Beamten und Bürokratie*, edited by Kersten Krüger (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1981), 55.

1. Making an Officer

It happened at eleven o'clock Wednesday morning, March 11, 1906. Major Groener was walking in Berlin's popular Tiergarten with his six-year-old daughter, when a man in civilian cloths fired a pistol at him from behind. Groener drew his sword to parry the attack, and the assassin shot twice more. Groener chased him, as did a nearby lieutenant and cannoneer. The assassin pulled the trigger again, but his weapon misfired, so he tossed it aside and surrendered. Meanwhile, "Dodo" had run after her father and fallen down, but remained otherwise unharmed. The would-be assassin, Otto Schuster, a journeyman plumber, did not know Groener, but he carried a grudge against the army. Born in 1875 and still liable to military service in the reserves, Schuster had gone to the United States for two years without obtaining the permission of local military authorities. Upon returning to Germany, he was locked up for ten days, which cost him his steady job. After he was released, he bought a pistol and ammunition in order to kill himself, but could not bring himself to do so. Upon receiving a letter from military authorities he decided he would rather shoot his district commander. He went to the Tiergarten instead, however, where he happened upon Groener, who, with the famous crimson stripes of a Great

General Staff officer on his trousers, presented a worthy target. Once in police custody, Schuster complained about mistreatment in the army, and newspapers reported that he was mentally unbalanced. Either way, his position became unbearable: twelve days after his arrest, the wretch was found hanging dead in his cell. Meanwhile, Groener had attained some local fame. Even *The Times* of London picked up the story: “There has been something uncanny about the murderous attacks of late which have been made on gentlemen of position without any apparent reasons.” Before Groener, two Prussian noblemen, a Count von Schack and a Herr von Zetwitz, had been shot at, the former on his estate, the latter on a train.¹

“Respectable” accounts of the attempt on Groener’s life used the language of class to emphasize a social and moral gap between Groener and

1. Annotated newspaper clippings, BA-MA, N46/27, fol. 114; see also fol. 80. The situation of soldiers in the Kaiserreich: Bernd Ulrich, Jakob Vogel and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Untertan in Uniform: Militär und Militarismus im Kaiserreich 1871–1914: Quellen und Dokumente* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2001), 57–84; Ute Frevert, *Die kasernierte Nation: Militärdienst und Zivilgesellschaft in Deutschland* (Munich: Beck, 2001), 228–301; Werner K. Blessing, “Disziplinierung und Qualifizierung: Zur kulturellen Bedeutung des Militärs im Bayern des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 17 (1991): 359–79; Thomas Rohkrämer, *Der Militarismus der “kleinen Leute,” Die Kriegervereine im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871–1914* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1990), 147–74; Hartmut Wiedner, “Soldatenmisshandlungen im Wilhelminischen Kaiserreich (1890–1914),” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 22 (1982): 159–99; Martin Hohohm, “Soziale Heeresmissstände als Teilursache des deutschen Zusammenbruchs von 1918,” in *Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918: Zweite Abteilung: Der innere Zusammenbruch*, vol. 11.1 of *Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der Verfassungsgebenden Deutschen Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages 1919–1930: Verhandlungen/Gutachten/Urkunden* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte m.b.H., 1929), 255–67; Dennis E. Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), 112–17.

Schuster, which contemporary assumptions about masculinity widened. Consistent with dominant notions of station and gender, Groener's appearance and comportment seemed inseparable. It did not cross his mind to get out of harm's way. Not only did he need to protect his daughter, but he was an officer. The fearless, vigorous behavior he displayed had to be second-nature. By contrast, Schuster's behavior comported with neither his appearance nor his station. No "gentleman," but respectably dressed and employed in a tolerable, if modest occupation, the plumber appeared unreliable, weak, cowardly, and unstable, that is, unmanly, unsexed, beyond the pale.² He shirked his patriotic military responsibilities, could not "find the courage" to kill himself with his new pistol, attacked Groener—whom he did not even know—from behind, and endangered the life of a little girl.³

2. The opposite pole of masculine images of men need not be feminine. The emasculation of a man often makes him an Other, something less than human, as the racist term *Untermensch* showed. Consider the images of Jews in George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64, 179. Likewise, "respectable" French men and women demonized Parisian *communards* in 1871 with distorted and exaggerated images of unfeminine *pétroleuses*, which helped to portray how close the social order had come to being destroyed (workers had forgotten their station and women their sex) and provided some justification for the army's brutal repression of the Commune; Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

3. The nexus between class, gender, appearance, and comportment: Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Ute Frevert, *Ehrenmänner: Das Duell in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Munich: dtv, 1995); Madeleine Hurd, "Class, Masculinity, Manners, and Mores," *Social Science History* 24.1 (2000): 75–110; Martin Francis, "The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity," *The Historical Journal* 45.3 (2002): 637–52. Dominant stereotypes of masculinity in modern

The language of class reflected a crucial social fact in the Kaiserreich: officers occupied a position at or near the pinnacle of society. Moreover, their achieved status as military professionals tended to be reinforced by their inherited status, that is, the occupation and social background of their fathers. Officers generally came from the “better” elements of society—from the families of nobles, officers, landowners, upper-echelon civil servants, and wealthy businessmen, although there were also men like Groener, for whom the officer corps represented a substantial improvement in social position. Even he, however, belonged to an educational elite. He had attended eight years of Gymnasium, the central secondary educational institution for Germany’s future leaders.⁴

Most of the historiography emphasizes the cultural, political, and military significance of officers’ social backgrounds to the near exclusion of their professional training and acculturation. This emphasis, however, is restricted to one segment of the officer corps: the nobility. Noblemen were supposed to have held the best positions, which allegedly guaranteed that character (read: birth) was more important than education and talent in the

Europe: Mosse, *Image of Man*; Ute Frevert, *Militär und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1997), 145–262; Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

4. The sociopolitical and cultural role of the Gymnasium: Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, 2 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1991), 1:547–61.

selection of new officers. Bourgeois officers supposedly perpetuated noble dominance by aping noble mores. The result, an aristocratic, “feudal” officer corps, was both a reflection and a cause of undemocratic, “militaristic” pathologies in Imperial Germany.⁵ Following this argument to its logical extreme, some historians portray noble social backgrounds and military professionalism as mutually exclusive. According to this interpretation, noblemen exercised a negative, retarding influence on the army’s growth, its response to technological change, and hence its military effectiveness.⁶ In

5. Classic and more recent studies in this vein with varying degrees of nuance include Franz Carl Endres, “Soziologische Struktur und ihr entsprechende Ideologien des deutschen Offizierkorps vor dem Weltkrieg,” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 58 (1927): 283–319; Eckart Kehr, “Zur Genesis des Königlich Preussischen Reserveoffiziers” and “Klassenkämpfe und Rüstungspolitik im kaiserlichen Deutschland,” in *Der Primat der Innenpolitik: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur preussisch-deutschen Sozialgeschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), 53–63, 87–110; Martin Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps, 1890–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968); Hanns Hubert Hofmann, ed., *Das deutsche Offizierkorps 1860–1960* (Boppard a.R.: Boldt, 1980); Detlef Bald, *Der deutsche Offizier: Sozial- und Bildungsgeschichte des deutschen Offizierkorps im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Bernard und Graefe, 1982); Daniel J. Hughes, *The King’s Finest: A Social and Bureaucratic Profile of Prussia’s General Officers, 1871–1914* (New York: Praeger, 1987); Steven E. Clemente, *For King and Kaiser! The Making of the Prussian Army Officer, 1860–1914* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992) See also Holger H. Herwig, *The German Naval Officer Corps: A Social and Political History, 1890–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973).

6. Some examples: Kehr, “Klassenkämpfe und Rüstungspolitik”; Hans Speier, “Ludendorff: The German Concept of Total War,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943), 306–21; Bernd-Felix Schulte, *Die deutsche Armee zwischen Beharren und Verändern* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1977); Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*; Clemente, *For King and Kaiser!*; Eric Dorn Brose, *The Kaiser’s Army: The Politics of Military Technology in Germany during the Machine Age, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). The concept of “military effectiveness,” Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray and Kenneth H. Watman, “The Effectiveness of Military Organizations,” in *Military Effectiveness*, ed. Alan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, Series on Defense and Foreign Policy (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 1:1–30.

all of these readings, military culture is equated with noble culture, although we know little about either.⁷ Even Ulrich Trumpener's once lone voice presupposes the unity of the two before the mid-nineteenth century, when he poses the otherwise heterodox question, "To what extent did the commoners in the Prussian officer corps adopt, copy, or modify the aristocratic values and modes of conduct they encountered?"⁸

Recent research of the early modern era suggests that there were indeed significant links between noble culture and military culture. In

7. Exceptions to this trend, which are beginning to make inroads on the historiographical consensus: Geoff Eley, "Army, State and Civil Society: Revisiting the Problem of German Militarism," in *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 85–109; Dennis E. Showalter, "Army, State and Society in Germany, 1870–1914: An Interpretation," in *Another Germany: A Reconsideration of the Imperial Era*, ed. Jack R. Dukes and Joachim Remak (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), 583–618; Showalter, *Tannenberg*; Geyer, "Past as Future." Studies that take up the challenge posed by this work: Stoneman, "Bürgerliche und adlige Krieger"; Marcus Funck, "Bereit zum Krieg? Entwurf und Praxis militärischer Männlichkeit im preußisch-deutschen Offizierkorps vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," in *Heimat—Front: Militär und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Zeitalter der Weltkriege*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stephanie Schüler-Springorum (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 2002), 69–90; Funck, "Schock und Chance: Der preussische Militäradel in der Weimarer Republik zwischen Stand und Profession," in Reif, *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland*, 2:127–71; Dierk Walter, *Preussische Heeresreform 1807–1870: Militärische Innovation und der Mythos der 'Roonschen Reform'* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003); Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). The "feudal" interpretation of the officer corps continues to thrive, however. Recent examples include Clemente, *For King and Kaiser!*, Brose, *Kaiser's Army*, and Kevin McAleer, *The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), which have all appeared since the challenge to the historiography offered by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), and the accompanying flood of literature on the German bourgeoisie. On the latter see Thomas Mergel, "Die Bürgertumsforschung nach 15 Jahren," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 41 (2001), 515–38.

8. Trumpener, "Junkers and Others," 33.

contrast to historiographical assumptions about the modern era, however, this research identifies aristocratic contributions to military professionalism, that is, it sees a modernizing potential in noble culture.⁹ This research also suggests that in the modern era, there was no inherent incompatibility between military professionalism and noble predominance.¹⁰ Such an interpretation, however, has yet to become historiographical consensus. One body of research on the modern period departs from the social interpretation of the officer corps to emphasize its functional role, its management of violence. This interpretation sees the officer corps as a body of consummate military professionals, whose operational successes in the nineteenth-century Wars of Unification and twentieth-century World Wars set the standard for officers around the world. The Great General Staff draws particularly strong praise.¹¹ If social background is considered in this

9. Rafe Blaufarb, "Aristocratic Professionalism in the Age of Democratic Revolution: The French Officer Corps, 1750–1815" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996); Christopher Storrs and H. M. Scott, "The Military Revolutions and the European Nobility, c. 1600–1800." *War in History* 3 (1996): 1–41.

10. Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 15; Heinz Reif, *Geschichte des deutschen Adels im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999), 15–29, 74–89; Geyer, "The Past as Future."

11. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory of Politics and Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957); Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Professional Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960); John L. Sutton, "The German General Staff in U. S. Defense Policy," *Military Affairs* 25 (1961): 197–202; T. N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807–1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian War Planning* (New York: Berg, 1991). Functional interpretations of the Great General Staff are addressed in Chapter 2.

interpretation, then progressive military developments are implicitly credited to commoners.¹² In general, however, the predominance of noblemen and noble culture in the officer corps remains conventional wisdom.

What did it take to become an officer and pursue a successful career? Did social background trump all other factors, including education and talent? How did Groener fit in? Given the modesty of his social background, was his prewar career an anomaly? Or must we adjust the dominant historiographical interpretation of the Wilhelmine officer corps to account for the careers of bourgeois officers? This chapter addresses these questions in four sections. First, it sketches the dynamic social contours of the officer corps, and it outlines its educational prerequisites and promotion system. Second, it examines Groener's social and educational background. It considers why he was admitted in the corps and how well he initially fit into its social structure. Third, it examines the process by which a civilian teenager was transformed into a lieutenant, and a lieutenant into a General Staff officer. It emphasizes that officers were made, not born. Fourth, it outlines his prewar career path in relation to his social background. The

12. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 30, 38–40. This theme is an implicit undercurrent in Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*.

chapter concludes that social background indeed figured large in the officer corps, but that its influence was neither straightforward nor absolute. While not typical, Groener's career was certainly a normal product of the professional Wilhelmine officer corps, and it therefore poses a significant challenge to the historiography.

Social Context

On March 29, 1890, the Kaiser proclaimed that obtaining "suitable replacements" was becoming one of the "most important and earnest duties" of his regimental commanders. Consistent with the rhetoric of his forefathers, he emphasized social background.

The increased level of our people's education [*Bildung*] offers the possibility of extending the circles that are considered for replacements for the officer corps. These days the nobility of birth alone cannot claim the prerogative of providing the army its officers as it had in days of yore. But the nobility of character [*Gesinnung*], which has always pervaded the officer corps, should and must be kept alive in it. . . . Besides the scions of the country's noble houses, besides the sons of my worthy officers and officials, who according to ancient tradition constitute the cornerstone of the officer corps, I see the future being upheld by the sons of honorable bourgeois [*bürgerlich*] houses in which the love of king and fatherland, a warm heart for the profession of arms [*Soldatenstand*], and a Christian ethos are cultivated and instilled.¹³

13. "Erlass über die Ergänzung des Offizierkorps," Hans Meier-Welcker, ed., *Offiziere im Bild von Dokumenten aus drei Jahrhunderten* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1964), 197.

The army was an instrument for not only making war, but also maintaining the domestic political order. The Hohenzollerns saw noblemen as their natural allies against Social Democracy and parliamentary efforts to encroach on military and foreign policy. The predominance of nobles in the officer corps was supposed to ensure its continued personal loyalty to Wilhelm, to whom all officers swore an oath of allegiance. A loyal, well-led officer corps made the army the Kaiser's own. By 1890, however, it was clear that educated commoners would defend Imperial Germany's monarchical and military order, with which they associated their country's newfound greatness and whose officer patents and other honors they prized.¹⁴

Wilhelm did not need to relinquish social traditions entirely, however, because in the past the Hohenzollerns had admitted commoners as stopgaps, often in war or other periods of expansion. Moreover, there was precedent for self-recruitment: the sons of non-noble officers could enter the

14. Hartmut John, *Das Reserveoffizierkorps im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1890–1914: Ein sozialgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Untersuchung der gesellschaftlichen Militarisierung im Wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1981); Showalter, "Army, State and Society"; Jakob Vogel, *Nationen im Gleichschritt: Der Kult der "Nation in Waffen" in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1870–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997); Frank Becker, *Bilder von Krieg und Nation: Die Einigungskriege in der bürgerlichen Öffentlichkeit Deutschlands 1864–1913* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001); Frevert, *Militär und Gesellschaft*; Frevert, *Die kasernierte Nation*; René Schilling, "Kriegshelden": *Deutungsmuster heroischer Männlichkeit in Deutschland 1813–1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002).

officer corps. The sons of bourgeois higher officials and estate owners (as well as estate stewards and leaseholders) were also acceptable, the former because of their fathers' relationship to the state, the latter because of their positions in the traditional milieu of the East Elbian nobility. Prussian military authorities sometimes lumped these groups together under the legitimizing heading of "good, Old Prussian officer material."¹⁵

These desirable circles could not satisfy the expanding army's appetite, however, especially since many other attractive career options were becoming available to educated young men—including noblemen—in Germany's dynamic economy.¹⁶ Hence, the officer corps also admitted the sons of men in the learned professions: doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, clergymen, humanistic secondary school teachers, and so on.¹⁷ Like higher officials, these men possessed both the educational prerequisites and held positions in proximity to the state, upon which they

15. This term is cited in Karl Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer und seine Offiziere* (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1930), 25–26.

16. A contemporary noble officer's observations on the changing situation of young noblemen: Wilhelm von Holleben, "Die wissenschaftliche Grundlage für den Offizier und die Reorganisation des Kadetten-Korps," *Jahrbücher für die deutsche Armee und Marine* (1902): 470–71. An historiographical assessment: Reif, *Geschichte des deutschen Adels*, 25–29, 85–87.

17. Hughes, *King's Finest*, 39–55; Bald, *Der deutsche Offizier*, 38–48, 71–74, 85–90; Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer*, 25–33; Christian Walter Gässler, "Offizier und Offizierkorps der Alten Armee in Deutschland als Voraussetzung einer Untersuchung über die Transformation der militärischen Hierarchie" (Ph.D. diss, Badische Ruprecht-Karl-Universität zu Heidelberg, 1930), 14–16.

depended for their education, certification, status, and often employment.¹⁸ Wealthy businessmen and industrialists did not fall into this category, but their sons might, insofar as their educational levels increased and their fathers drew nearer the state, in Prussia accepting from it the honorific title of Commercial Councilor.¹⁹ Catholics tended to play second fiddle to Protestants, especially in the upper ranks of the officer corps.²⁰ Jews, on the other hand, remained beyond the pale, despite their advances in Wilhelmine bourgeois society and court circles.²¹

The quantitative dimensions of social change in the officer corps were striking. From 1875 to 1881 there was an annual average of 401,659 soldiers and noncommissioned officers in the standing army. By 1913 a series of armaments bills had increased this figure to 661,478.²² The number of active army officers in Germany grew from some 17,000 to about 30,450

18. Charles McClelland, *The German Experience of Professionalization: Modern Learned Professions and Their Organizations from the Early Nineteenth Century to the Hitler Era* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

19. Karin Kaudelka-Hanisch, *Preussische Kommerzienräte in der Provinz Westfalen und im Regierungsbezirk Düsseldorf (1810–1918)* (Münster: Ardey Verlag, 1993).

20. Hughes, *King's Finest*, 32–34. In the last decade before World War One, some 5% of Prussian brigadier generals were Catholic, whereas Catholics comprised a third of Prussia's population.

21. Stephan Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer: Sozialer Niedergang und politische Radikalisierung im deutschen Adel zwischen Kaiserreich und NS-Staat* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 134–43; Werner T. Angress, "Prussia's Army and the Jewish Reserve Officer Controversy before World War I," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 17 (1972): 19–42.

22. Freiherr Rüdiger von Collenberg, *Die deutsche Armee 1871–1914* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1922), 122.

during the same period. Over two thirds of the latter number belonged to the Prussian contingent, while the rest were in the Saxon, Bavarian, and Württemberg contingents.²³ As the officer corps expanded, the nobility became a minority within it. Nobles comprised 65% of the Prussian officer corps in 1860, but only 30% in 1913, although their real numbers doubled during the same period.²⁴ The nobility comprised an even smaller portion of the other contingents, whose states had fewer nobles to draw upon and whose nobility's traditions of military service were weaker. Nobles made up 50% of the Saxon officer corps in 1878 and 15% in 1908. Some 25% of the Bavarian officer corps was noble at the time of German unification. This number sank to 18% in 1911 and 15% just before war broke out.²⁵ The

23. Most statistical evidence did not survive a bomb that hit the Reichsarchiv in Potsdam during the Second World War. Archive-based studies published prior to that war contain somewhat contradictory information, although they convey a clear sense of the dimensions of change. The figure of 30,450 stems from Rüdts von Collenberg, 108, which excludes medical and veterinary officers as well as military officials (*Beamte*). According to Karl Demeter, *The German Officer Corps in Society and State, 1650–1945*, trans. Angus Malcolm (New York: Praeger, 1965), 47, there were 22,112 active Prussian army officers in 1914; however, the same scholar attributes 3,855 active officers to Saxony in 1908 and 8,512 officers to Bavaria in 1893 in Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer*, 39, 48. Württemberg had about half the number of Bavaria, which leaves a far larger aggregate figure than Demeter's 30,450. The inclusion of veterinary and medical officers as well as military officials alone cannot account for this discrepancy. More accurate figures might be gleaned from the published active lists, although officers were sometimes listed more than once, and usually only last names were provided. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 2:220, uses 17,000 and 30,000 for 1874 and 1913 respectively.

24. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 4 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1987), 3:819, according to whom there were 3,240 nobles in 1860 and 6,630 in 1913.

25. Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer*, 39, cf. 48; Hermann Rüschöttl, *Das bayerische Offizierkorps 1866–1914* (Berlin: Duncker, 1973), 62–63. Demeter gives lower figures for Saxony, 21% in 1872 and 13% in 1893, probably because he counted officers who were

Württemberg officer corps was only 19.5% noble in 1910, and this figure would have been much smaller, had not bourgeois generals automatically received a patent of personal nobility in Württemberg until 1913.²⁶

Bourgeois officers were ennobled in the other contingents as well, so the potential influence of commoners was higher than these numbers suggest. Elevation into the nobility did not automatically erase their past, which was inscribed in their dispositions, the product of their upbringing.²⁷ In any case, as early as 1867, Prussian military authorities in charge of examining and approving the qualifications of officer candidates no longer saw the categories of “noble” and “commoner” as adequate indicators of social background. Hence, they began to classify candidates according to their fathers’ occupations.²⁸

The statistics they collected on students at Prussian war schools (officer candidate schools) showed that officer recruitment comported with Wilhelm II’s criteria for a “nobility of character.” (Table 1) These statistics

ennobled during their career.

26. Joachim Fischer, “Das württembergische Offizierkorps 1866–1918,” in *Das deutsche Offizierkorps 1860–1960*, ed. Hanns Hubert Hofmann (Boppard a.R.: Boldt, 1980), 103. A patent of personal nobility could not be passed on to the next generation. “Adel und Bürgertum in der Armee mit statistischen Übersichten. 1908–1913,” Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (HStAS), M1/3, bu. 629, fols. 12–13, 26–32.

27. See sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s key concept of the habitus, which he uses in Bourdieu, *Distinction*. For more on Bourdieu’s approach see Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology*.

28. Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer*, 25.

were significant, because Prussia had the largest, most “aristocratic” contingent, and its war schools were the path that most candidates followed into the officer corps. According to one estimate, 85% or more of the Prussian contingent joined the officer corps via this route.²⁹ In the last decade before the First World War, almost a third of officer candidates at Prussian war schools were the sons of active and retired officers. During the same period, more than a third of officer candidates in Prussian war schools had fathers in a university-educated profession—higher officials, ministers, lawyers, professors, and doctors. Owners, leaseholders, and stewards of estates made up more than a tenth of the war school students’ fathers. More than 15% were businessmen and factory owners, and some were men of independent means. Finally, the sons of minor officials and noncommissioned officers comprised less than 5% of all officer candidates at Prussian war schools.³⁰ In any case, the Prussian contingent was socially

29. Heinz Stübiger, “Der Einfluss des Militärs auf Schule und Lehrerschaft,” in *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte*, ed. Christa Berg (Munich: Beck, 1991), 4:517. Between 1878 and 1890, only 15% of officer candidates entered the army through the cadet schools, which the Hohenzollern monarchy maintained for the sons of nobles and officers of modest means. This percentage must have grown smaller during the following years, as the army grew. Those who did not enter through a cadet school attended one of the war schools.

30. Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer*, 31; Detlef Bald, *Der deutsche Generalstab, 1859–1939: Reform und Restauration in Ausbildung und Bildung* (Munich: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr, 1977), 112.

heterogeneous. Given the Prussian preponderance, the German officer corps as a whole was heterogeneous too.

Officers' primary point of reference, however, was the regimental officer corps, where things often looked quite different. Many Prussian regiments were either predominantly noble or bourgeois, while others were mixed, depending on the wishes of the officers within the regiment as well as the officer candidates available. (Tables 2 and 3) Prospective officers sought entrance in the army through a regiment of their choosing. Prospects made their choice according to the mutually dependent factors of branch of arms, prestige of the regiment, family tradition, location, cost of living, and how well they would fit in. The last factor was strictly enforced by the regiments themselves: no prospect gained entrance to a regiment without the unanimous approval of its officer corps. Nobles tended to concentrate in prestigious guards units in Potsdam and Berlin, especially the cavalry and infantry, but also the artillery. Nobles also were prominent in regional capitals and cities with an enjoyable quality of life, and they served in rural Prussian regiments in which their families' had a tradition of leadership. Commoners with few connections or insufficient funds for an elaborate regimental social life (a problem for many less fortunate noblemen too) found their way into less desirable locations on Germany's eastern and

western frontiers. They also filled the officer corps of the less glamorous support units: combat engineers, railroads, and supply units.³¹

Nobles were in a minority, but they reacted not only by isolating themselves in the best units, but also by occupying a disproportionately large percentage of key leadership positions. Detlef Bald calls this phenomenon the “pyramid of nobility.”³² The lower the rank, the higher the percentage of commoners was; the higher the rank, the more marked was the noble presence. (Table 4)

The nobility’s remarkable staying power, however, should not overshadow another important development: the number of commoners in key leadership positions was steadily increasing, albeit more slowly than their numbers in the lower ranks of the officer corps. No doubt many allegations of favoritism and cronyism among nobles had some basis in fact.³³ Nonetheless, the central role of seniority in promotions meant that

31. Hughes, *King’s Finest*, 56–57, 70, 74–76, 79; Max van den Bergh, *Das deutsche Heer vor dem Weltkriege: Eine Darstellung und Würdigung* (Berlin: Sanssouci, 1934), 103–7. See also the annual active lists, for example, *Rang- und Quartier-Liste der Königlich Preussischen Armee für den aktiven Dienststand* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1890–1900). The public discourse from the time also offers much anecdotal evidence. Newspaper clippings in “Adel und Bürgertum in der Armee mit statistischen Übersichten: 1908–1913,” HStAS, M 1/3, bu. 629; “Jena oder Sedan?” (book review), in *Deutsches Offizierblatt* 7.20 (19 May 1903): 4.

32. Bald, *Der deutsche Offizier*, 93.

33. See, for example, the many newspaper clippings in “Adel und Bürgertum in der Armee mit statistischen Übersichten: 1908–1913,” HStAS, M 1/3, bu. 629.

changes in the social composition of the lower ranks needed time to affect the social composition of the upper ranks. In fact, the gains of commoners before the war were impressive. Take, for instance, the corps commanders, who held the rank of General of the Infantry (the equivalent of a three star general in the United States). The corps was the German army's basic administrative and fighting unit, and becoming a corps commander represented the apex of a military career. Even men in higher staff positions did not wield as much power in peacetime as the corps commanders. The Prussian contingent had 128 corps commanders during the long peace between 1871 and 1914. Of these commanding generals twenty-six (20%) had been born commoners and two to fathers who had been ennobled. In each corps were two divisions led by General Lieutenants, who were one rank below the corps commanders. During the same period Prussia and Württemberg had some 550 divisional commanders, of whom 182 (33%) had been born commoners and fifteen others into newly ennobled families. Of these men 131 were themselves elevated to noble status, while fifty-one remained commoners.³⁴ Not only did commoners rise high, but nobles who exhibited inadequate skills left the active officer corps before they made

34. Trumpener, "Junkers and Others," 30–33. The role of the corps and division in the German army: Showalter, *Tannenberg*, 107, 117–18.

major.³⁵ The significance of talent for successful careers was even more pronounced in the Great General Staff, whose all-important Operations Section was headed only by commoners after 1898. Between 1871 and 1914, forty-four Prussian generals served in the General Staff as chief quartermasters above the powerful section chiefs. Twenty (45%) of these men were born commoners and three came from newly ennobled families.³⁶ Noble staying power in the German officer corps was not the only important story in Wilhelmine military history.

The steadily increasing number of commoners in key leadership positions stemmed from the professionalization of the officer corps since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century.³⁷ The still disproportionately high representation of the nobility in the German officer corps was not a countervailing trend. Military professionalism and nobility were compatible. An aristocratic social background could open doors in the officer corps, but it by no means guaranteed a career. Nobles and commoners alike had to meet

35. Gädke, "Also sprach Herr v. Einem!" *Berliner Tageblatt*, 24 March 1909, clipping in "Adel und Bürgertum in der Armee mit statistischen Übersichten. 1908–1913," HStAS, M1/3, bu. 629, fol. 18. Gädke was an outspoken critic of the nobility's strong position in the officer corps.

36. Trumpener, "Junkers and Others," 33.

37. On this process see Geyer, "Past as Future"; Walter, *Preussische Heeresreform*.

educational requirements, and they followed clearly defined career paths that depended on a combination of seniority and military competence.³⁸

This fact is often downplayed in the historiography, which has been influenced by the stock Wilhelmine stereotype of the uncultivated, narrow-minded officer.³⁹ No doubt this stereotype mirrored reality in many cases. The deficits to which this public discourse pointed were only part of the story, however. With few exceptions, all Bavarian officer candidates had to have an *Abitur* (certificate of eligibility to study at university).⁴⁰ In Prussia, Saxony, and Württemberg, on the other hand, only the *Primareife* was necessary (a certificate of eligibility to complete the last two years of secondary schooling). Nonetheless, 44% of the officer candidates in these contingents had an *Abitur* in 1900, when officer candidates with the *Abitur* began to have the date of their commission backdated two years, in order to compensate for the two-year advantage in service time that officers with only a *Primareife* had over them. The number of officer candidates with an *Abitur* then grew to almost 52% by 1906 and 65% by 1912. Young men with

38. Gerhard Papke, ed., *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Offizierkorps: Anciennität und Beförderung nach Leistung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962); Stoneman, "Bürgerliche und adlige Krieger," 37–45.

39. See the many caricatures in Franz Conring, *Das deutsche Militär in der Karikatur* (Stuttgart: H. Schmidt, 1907), for example, 52 and facing page (Beilage 9), 63, 114, 123.

40. Rümshöttel, *Das bayerische Offizierkorps*, 46–55.

an Abitur automatically fulfilled the officer corps' educational requirement. Those with a Primareife went to Berlin to take the ensign's exam, a written and oral exam that determined the suitability of the candidate's academic preparation and comportment. While it was still possible to obtain a royal exemption from the educational requirements, exemptions from the Primareife in the Prussian, Saxon, and Württemberg contingents averaged only between 4% and 9% in the last decade before the war, and exemptions from the ensign's exam remained well below 1%.⁴¹

The educational levels of officer candidates compared favorably to those of male youth in Germany as a whole. In 1911, only 5% of male school-age children attended a school where earning an Abitur was possible, that is, a humanistic *Gymnasium*, a *Realgymnasium* (which emphasized modern languages over Latin and Greek), or a cadet school (military boarding schools that followed the curriculum of the Realgymnasium).⁴²

Despite the social and curricular differences among Germany's many Abitur-granting institutions, their students formed a distinct social group. Only they could consider studying for one of the learned professions, such as

41. Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer*, 98; Hughes, *King's Finest*, 61–65; Stübig, "Der Einfluss des Militärs," 515. Cf. Bald, *Der deutsche Offizier*, 111–12, which incorrectly states that the Abitur was mandated throughout the German empire after 1871.

42. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 1:555.

doctor, lawyer, clergyman, or upper-level official, provided they earned their Abitur. The significance of attending an Abitur-granting institution also related to mandatory military service. Pupils with a Primareife or better had the right to fulfill their military service as one-year volunteers, instead of doing compulsory service for two years (three years before 1893), provided they could pay for their own military equipment. If their one-year service went well and their social background was respectable, these men could become reserve officers, whose patents were much sought after in Wilhelmine Germany.⁴³ The social significance of earning the right to be a one-year volunteer can be seen in the primary school teachers' efforts to gain the privilege, even though they attended separate teaching seminars of far lower prestige.⁴⁴ Together with their classmates who entered civilian professions or the business world, Germany's officer candidates fulfilled educational requirements that most German youth did not. "The Gymnasium," writes Thomas Nipperdey, "mediated the common language and way of thinking of the opinion-forming society, the political public. The entire bureaucratic, parliamentarian, economic, educated, professional

43. Lothar Mertens, "Das Privileg des Einjährig-Freiwilligen Militärdienstes im Kaiserreich und seine gesellschaftliche Bedeutung," *Militargeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 39.1 (1986): 59–66; Mertens, "Bildungsprivileg und Militärdienst im Kaiserreich: Die gesellschaftliche Bedeutung des einjährig-freiwilligen Militärdienstes für das deutsche Bürgertum," *Bildung und Erziehung* 43 (1990): 217–28.

44. Stübiger, "Der Einfluss des Militärs," 521–23.

[*freiberüflich*], and associational elite [*Führungsschicht*] was shaped by it.”⁴⁵

In other words, most officers came from the same cultural milieu as civilian professionals, not from an alien, “feudal” milieu.

To be sure, officers who attended cadet schools differed from other officers in one important respect. Already as ten-year-old boys they were subject to military discipline in a boarding-school environment, which adversely affected the personal development of some.⁴⁶ On the other hand, cadet school alumni formed only 15% of the Prussian officer candidates between 1878 and 1890,⁴⁷ and this number declined as the army grew in the last two decades before the First World War. More importantly, cadet schools followed a Realgymnasium curriculum, and discussions over reforming them occurred in reference to broader discussions of secondary-school reform.⁴⁸

45. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 1:548.

46. In an interesting bit of perhaps inadvertant self-revelation, Erich Ludendorff, himself a former cadet, wrote that this was the case in *Meine militärische Werdegang: Blätter der Erinnerung an unser stolzes Heer* (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1933), 6.

47. Stübig, “Der Einfluss des Militärs,” 517.

48. Ibid, 515–19; Manfred Messerschmidt, “Schulpolitik des Militärs,” in *Bildungspolitik in Preussen zur Zeit des Kaiserreichs*, ed. Peter Baumgart (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980), 242–55; Holleben, “Die wissenschaftliche Grundlage”; John Moncure, *Forging the King’s Sword: Military Education between Tradition and Modernization: The Case of the Royal Prussian Cadet Corps, 1871–1918* (New York: Lang, 1993). Cf. Klaus Schmitz, *Militärische Jugenderziehung: Preussische Kadettenhäuser und nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten zwischen 1807 und 1936* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997). See also James C. Albisetti, “Education,” in *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*, ed. Roger Chickering (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 244–71; Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Once in the army, officers followed regular career paths that encouraged the advancement of competent officers and subverted excessive outside social and political pressures on promotions and appointments. Promotions depended to a large extent on seniority and competence. Seniority was calculated within each regiment up to the rank of captain. Then it was calculated within each branch of arms. Hence, inequalities among different units occurred. Officers with poor performance reports were passed over for promotion and retired. Many captains did not make it past the notorious “major’s corner.”⁴⁹ The fairness of the promotion system was openly questioned in the press, although criticism was limited by the military discipline to which even retired officers were subject.⁵⁰ Personal connections also mattered, but the promotion system was not arbitrary.⁵¹ Officially published active lists from the time reveal regular career paths. Moreover, enough officers purchased these lists to support the annual publication of private lists that competed with the official lists of Prussia,

49. Papke, *Anciennität und Beförderung nach Leistung*; Hughes, *King’s Finest*, 75–104.

50. A court of honor stripped one retired regimental commander, Gädke, of his commission, because he published criticism in the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*. See his many articles in HStAS, M1/3, bu. 629, fols. 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 18, 20, and bu. 793, fol. 79. His byline first contained the coveted official military designation “*Oberst a.D.*” (retired colonel), but after his trial an unofficial description followed his name, “formerly Colonel and Commander of the Field Artillery Regiment 41.” Other officers avoided this fate by publishing anonymously.

51. The role of connections in Wilhelmine military careers: Hughes, *King’s Finest*, 104.

Württemberg, Bavaria, and Saxony. The market for these lists would not have existed, had officers believed that promotions were arbitrary or depended only on social background.⁵²

The importance of these active lists can also be seen in the following recollection that one officers' wife had of another: "Her reputation preceded her. People joked that she was militarily so knowledgeable that she always kept the active list and *Militär-Wochenblatt* (Military Weekly) by her bed."⁵³ This anecdote had the quality of an insider's story, in which the insider, Mathilde Freifrau von Gregory, was not talking exclusively to other noble wives. Any officer or member of an officer's family could understand the comment. Officers' experiences varied by social background, regiment, region, and occupational specialty, but all officers shared a common mode of life that was informed by the military context in which they lived and worked.

52. Official lists were published in Prussia, Württemberg, Bavaria, and Saxony. Enough officers read these lists to support the publication of lists by competing private companies. Publishers convinced advertisers that their lists were widely read. The official *Dienstalters-Liste der Königlich Preussischen Armee und des XIII. (Königlich Württembergischen) Armeekorps*, published annually in Berlin by E. S. Mittler, had an extensive advertising section in it. So did the unofficial *Deutsche Rangliste umfassend das gesamte aktive Offizierkorps*, published by G. Stalling and the Verlag des Deutschen Offizierblattes in Oldenburg i.Gr. See also Friedrich-Christian Stahl, "Einführung," in *Ehrenrangliste des ehemaligen Deutschen Heeres* (Osnabrück: Biblio, 1987); Stoneman, "Bürgerliche und adlige Krieger," 43–45.

53. Mathilde Freifrau von Gregory, *Dreissig Jahre preussische Soldatenfrau* (Brünn: Rohrer, 1933), 65.

Suitability

What did this social and professional context mean for Wilhelm Groener? Why was he able to pursue a career in the officer corps? Family background played a critical role, and there were no nobles, officers, or members of the learned professions in the Groener family. Nor was it wealthy. If Groener's admission to the Imperial German officer corps was not a foregone conclusion, however, neither did his modest social provenance exclude him outright. Württemberg had cultivated a different tradition of service since becoming a kingdom under Napoleon's aegis. It had a smaller, less insular nobility than Prussia. Next to the nobility of blood had been created a nobility of service: individuals in the highest four ranks of military or civil service automatically received the noble particle "von" for their person, but they could not pass it on to their descendants.⁵⁴ Even with this title on offer, commoners of means long remained aloof from the army, which possessed less prestige in Württemberg than in Prussia until after German unification. The Württemberg officer corps did not reach a level of social

54. Württemberg stopped giving out titles of personal nobility in 1913. "Personaladel in Württemberg," *Württembergische Zeitung*, 12–13 May 1908; "Die Abschaffung des Personaladels," *Württembergische Zeitung*, 4 Sept. 1913; "Der persönliche Adel: Württemberg voran," *Berliner Tageblatt*, 8 Sept. 1913; these and other clippings, in: HStAS, M1/3, bundle 629, fols. 12–13, 26–32.

exclusivity comparable to Prussia's until after Groener had already entered the army. In 1872 more than four fifths of the Württemberg officer corps came from non-noble families, and almost half of this number came from the petit bourgeoisie. By 1912 less than a tenth of the officer corps came from petit bourgeois families.⁵⁵ If Groener had the right educational credentials and came from an unobjectionable family by Württemberg's standards, he might become an officer. His chances of acceptance were rather good, both because of his formal qualifications and due to the efficacious influence that his family background exercised on his dispositions.

He hailed from a family that understood the practical value of education and had served the Württemberg state—albeit in modest positions—since the early nineteenth century. Indeed, service to the young kingdom had offered his grandfather and father opportunities for upward social mobility. Hand in glove with this experience went their positive attitude towards education. Wilhelm Groener's dispositions were colored by this family history. Through no conscious effort of his own, he had acquired traces of his father's and grandfather's occupational experiences and values. If his social background did not make him an obvious candidate for

55. Fischer, "Das württembergische Offizierkorps," 99–138, esp. 105.

future military leadership, his socialization made his career choice and success less surprising.⁵⁶

Wilhelm Groener's paternal grandfather, Johann Michael Groener (1799–1865), was the son of a weaver from the district of Heidenheim on the Brenz in Württemberg. Perhaps because weaving was becoming an increasingly untenable way to make a living in this area, Michael served as a soldier in Ludwigsburg, Württemberg's royal residence, and Marktgröningen. He attained citizenship rights in the latter town in 1835. That same year he married Friederike Schütt (1803–1852), the daughter of a local master tanner and councilor, and he moved to Ludwigsburg, where he became a minor official, a *Kanzleiaufwärter* to the Royal Arsenal.⁵⁷

His son, Karl Eduard Groener (1837–1893), helped to improve the family's social position still further. In Ludwigsburg Eduard attended *Realschule*, a secondary school intended to qualify boys for modest white-collar jobs. He planned to pursue a career as a minor official, but in 1858 he was conscripted into the Württemberg army for six years.⁵⁸ If his parents

56. Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Bourdieu, *Outline*; Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology*.

57. Ernst Kabisch, *Groener* (Leipzig: R. Kittler, 1932), 7; Wilhelm Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen: Jugend-Generalstab-Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1957), 31; Groener-Geyer, family tree for National Socialist authorities, BA-MA, N46/D; Hans Medick, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900: Lokalgeschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 229–63.

58. Kabisch, *Groener*, 8; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 32.

had possessed sufficient means, they could have paid for someone to go in his stead, a common practice in the south German states before the Kaiserreich was forged.⁵⁹ A Württemberg officer later recalled enlisted men's quarters from this time: "The conscripts' keep could be so meager and miserable because, of course, they generally were highly modest people without means. It was not fitting for those who were even almost prosperous to serve personally."⁶⁰ It is also possible that the father, Michael, thought military service was not such a bad thing. It had enabled him to improve his own socioeconomic position, and it could do the same for Eduard, especially with a practical secondary education under his belt. Moreover, Eduard was some twenty-one years old and could earn his own keep. Perhaps his conscription was not as inopportune as his son Wilhelm later believed.

Eduard Groener re-enlisted as an *Einsteher*, a substitute for someone who had been drafted, in order to collect a bounty and support his wife, Auguste, née Boleg (1825–1907), daughter of an *Amtsnotar*, a minor official. Auguste belonged to "the educated class [*Stand*]."⁶¹ With intelligence and

59. Frevert, *Die kasernierte Nation*, 133–92.

60. Albert Pfister, *Deutsche Zwietracht: Erinnerungen aus meiner Leutnantszeit 1859–1869* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1902), 58–59.

61. Quoted from an evaluation of Eduard Groener in Kabisch, *Groener*, 9. Eduard's biography: *ibid.*, 8–11; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 32, 61; obituary, *Ludwigsburger Zeitung*, 4 Nov. 1893, BA-MA, N46/D. A sense of this man's relative cultural distinction can

more education than most enlisted men in Württemberg at that time, Eduard Groener pursued a successful career as a noncommissioned officer, and then, after the war of 1870–71, became a paymaster, the highest rank his social station and education would allow him to attain. Paymasters were officials, not officers, and they could never become officers. Nonetheless, they ate in the officers' mess, the casino, in which each regimental officer corps socialized. Eduard Groener appears to have achieved an unusually strong position in the social life of his final unit, the Dragoon Regiment Queen Olga No. 25, a cavalry unit in which he had served during the 1870–71 war and also spent the last thirteen years of his life. A biographer and contemporary of his son wrote that officers told guests in the Twenty-Fifth Dragoon's casino, "You are not allowed to sit in that chair; it belongs to Paymaster Groener."⁶² His funeral procession on November 2, 1893 included three Württemberg generals, the entire officer corps of his regiment, other officers from the Ludwigsburg garrison, and comrades from other garrisons. His son, Wilhelm, on the other hand, later wrote, "My father was not happy in his occupation; his abilities lay fallow and it weighed upon him that he

be gleaned from a rare study on Prussian non-commissioned officers who became officials in Prussia's civilian administration; Tibor Süle, "Die Militäranwärter als Personalproblem der zivilen Staatsverwaltung im wilhelminischen Preussen," *Die Verwaltung* 19 (1986): 196–212.

62. Kabisch, *Groener*, 11.

could not get out of his tight pecuniary circumstances.”⁶³ Eduard Groener saw to it that his son, Wilhelm, enjoyed better opportunities and acquired a practical sense of their value.

Wilhelm Groener was born in Ludwigsburg in 1867, and he went to school in Ludwigsburg and Ulm. He attended a type of school that would open more doors than Realschule had for his father: Gymnasium. If he stayed the full course and earned the Abitur, he would be able to study at university; however, his parents could not afford such a path, not to mention the heavy financial burden that the learned professions imposed for many years after completion of a degree. “I do not want to say . . . that I became an officer only for practical reasons,” recalled Groener in his memoirs. “I was a soldier with heart and soul, but from the outset my choice of occupations was very limited.”⁶⁴ Wilhelm attended Gymnasium until shortly before he turned sixteen, when he earned his *Primareife*, which was prerequisite to taking the ensign’s exam and entering the officer corps. Attending Gymnasium beyond this level would have been an unnecessary expense for Wilhelm’s parents, and it would have set Wilhelm back a couple years in his military career, because of the importance of seniority. Instead

63. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 32.

64. Ibid, 32–37, quote 37.

Wilhelm took the common step of cramming with a retired officer at a so-called “military preparation institution” (*Militärvorbildungsanstalt*) for his ensign’s exam.⁶⁵

A military career was a natural choice for him. He grew up surrounded by soldiers and officers in an atmosphere in which positive predispositions to military service thrived. In Ludwigsburg he first lived in the same building as the brigade commander, Lieutenant General Baur-Breitenfeld, whose granddaughter carried him to his baptism. A school friend, Kurt, was the son of his future regimental commander, Colonel Freiherr von Lupin, whose daughter, Helene, infatuated Groener as a schoolboy. Another school friend, Gerold von Gleich, was the son of a prominent Württemberg officer, Alarich von Gleich, and himself became a career cavalry officer. Groener’s father and grandfather had both served the Württemberg colors and passed on positive attitudes towards a career in state service. Moreover, “as a little boy nothing interested me so much as my father’s accounts of his war experiences in France,” he later wrote. “As simple as they were, they left a deep impression on me.”⁶⁶ This powerful,

65. Kabisch, *Groener*, 12; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 37. Costs of embarking on a career in the officer corps compared with other options of similar social prestige: Heinrich Schröder, *Oberlehrer, Richter, Offiziere: Statistische Untersuchungen zur Lösung der Gehaltsaufbesserungsfrage* (Kiel: Lipsius und Tischer, 1897).

66. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 32–42, quote 39.

positive association between the army and the founding of the Kaiserreich was common, but it could be especially potent for veterans' sons, whose identities tended to form in relation to their fathers.

Wilhelm Groener's upbringing helped to ensure that he would take to the officer corps like a fish to water. But would the officer corps take to him? The young Groener had the necessary personal connections to obtain the prerequisite recommendation from the commander of the infantry regiment he wanted to join, the 121st.⁶⁷ He knew the commander's family.⁶⁸ Moreover, his father was well-respected in Ludwigsburg and knew a lot of people. Indeed, Eduard Groener even had a personal connection to the 121st. He had served in it briefly just after the 1870–71 war.⁶⁹

Regimental commanders selected officer candidates; however, the four-day-long ensign's exam enabled Prussian military authorities in Berlin to enforce basic social and educational standards across the regionally and socially diverse regiments of Germany (except for Bavaria). The application process included providing information about the youth's family history.

67. The role of regimental commanders and the significance of personal relationships: Hughes, *King's Finest*, 56–57.

68. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 42.

69. Obituary, *Ludwigsburger Zeitung*, 4 Nov. 1893, BA-MA, N46/D; Kabisch, *Groener*, 10; Hugo Schempp and Richard Hardegg, *Geschichte des 3. Württ. Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 121: 1716–1891* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1891), 121.

The exam was academic. Groener was tested in mathematics, German, Latin, French, English, history, geography, and drawing. On the last day he sat for one hour before a panel of seven for an oral exam, whose purpose was not only to ensure adequate academic preparation, but also that the candidate possessed bearing and comportment appropriate to the officer corps.⁷⁰ The young Groener passed this hurdle, demonstrating that he met the army's expectations even beyond the provincial confines of Ludwigsburg.

He nonetheless had to clear one more hurdle. The entire officer corps of the regiment to which he sought entry had to give its unanimous consent to his admission.⁷¹ This process helped to maintain the desired level of homogeneity within individual regiments, which in turn was supposed to foster each regimental officer corps' comradeship—a central value in the culture of the German officer corps. Infantry Regiment No. 121 had few nobles and included at least two other members of the *petite bourgeoisie*—Major Kallenberger, son of a staff sergeant, and Lieutenant Knoblauch, son of an ordinary teacher. The majority of the officers—from *petite bourgeois*

70. "Auszug aus den Prüfungs-Verhandlungen vom 19ten September 1884," 8 Oct. 1884, BA-MA, N46/26; Moncure, *Forging the King's Sword*, 234–37, 40; Clemente, *For King and Kaiser!*, 65–72, which contains useful details, although it judges the process a sham, because it did not meet the author's expectations.

71. Hughes, *King's Finest*, 57.

to nobles—had fathers who had served or were serving the Württemberg state in a military or civilian capacity. (Table 5.) Groener looked like he would fit in.

Becoming an Officer

The “right” upbringing and education by themselves did not make the officer, even if they helped to ensure that the candidate had the dispositions, raw ability, and cultivation that the army’s leaders thought desirable. The officer corps’ professional training and acculturation were not coterminous with the social backgrounds and prejudices of its members. While social background influenced dispositions and comportment, it did not necessarily play a primary role in officers’ working lives. The officer corps was a profession with its own internal demands and logic.⁷² Officers were not born, they were made—and the bulk of this making was accomplished within the officer corps itself.

Groener put on a uniform and moved into the garrison on his seventeenth birthday, the earliest permissible moment, because seniority figured large in promotions. He began as a simple soldier, although he was

72. In other words, the officer corps was a *field*; see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson (N.p.: Columbia University Press, 1993).

designated an officer candidate (*Avantageur*) and quartered separately in a room with one other candidate. His basic military training also occurred separately from the regular conscripts. Its content was the same, but its tone was more respectful. Groener had to learn the soldier's craft by practicing it; however, he also had to learn that he was becoming someone special, an officer, leader of soldiers and maker of men. To this end, the regimental commander paid special attention to the officer candidates. He once surprised Groener and his roommate while they were having a big breakfast in their beds on a Sunday morning: Colonel Lupin chatted with the two youths for a few minutes in a friendly, paternalistic manner while they remained as they were. Another time he invited the officer candidates to a party for the regimental officer corps at his home.⁷³ In this way he imparted important lessons about the officer candidates' station in life as well as comradeship among officers of the regiment.

The officer candidates had to attend a regular *Montagskranz*. Every Monday the officer corps' wives gathered in a local museum, where they either sat around the edges of a hall or played games in a neighboring room. It was the officer candidates' duty to dance with them when the women were so inclined. Groener and the others did not enjoy these gatherings,

73. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 38, 41–42.

which were rather stiff for their taste.⁷⁴ These circles, however, taught important lessons. The regimental officer corps was a family, and sociability in mixed company was an essential part of its life. The officers' wives occupied positions in the social hierarchy commensurate with their husbands' ranks. At home they presided over their family's representation and sociability vis-à-vis the other officer families. The wives of company, battalion, and regimental commanders also watched over the wives of their husbands' subordinates, and they initiated young, still single lieutenants into the proper social graces. An officer's career could depend as much upon his wife's performance as his own.⁷⁵

Marriage, however, was not imminent for the seventeen-year-old officer candidate. He later recalled his imposing and demanding instructor, whose drills and exercises had helped him grow stronger and fill out. "Sergeant Schwarz undertook my training. He was a fairly rugged warrior of massive stature and not inconsiderable girth. I was still a slight lad, and the exercises were quite fatiguing, for which I compensated with an immense appetite that led me to the mess hall every break to renew my

74. Groener, type-written draft of memoirs, BA-MA, N46/9, fols. 15–16.

75. On women's roles in the regiment: Bergh, *Das deutsche Heer*, 131–33; Gregory, *Dreissig Jahre preussische Soldatenfrau*; *Die praktische Offizierfrau*, a supplement to the weekly *Deutsches Offizierblatt*; Funck, "Bereit zum Krieg?," 76–77.

strength.”⁷⁶ Groener received his first enlisted promotion, private first class (*Gefreite*), a month later in time for Christmas. Besides military drills and exercises, he was supposed to do some book learning with a First Lieutenant Fetzer, the brother of the king’s personal physician. Groener went to the lieutenant’s apartment for these enjoyable lessons, which usually consisted of listening to the officer read a few pages from the regulations, followed by a conversation “about everything else except military theories.” This was “the most original personality” in the company, but his career did not go far.⁷⁷ When Groener made sergeant in 1885, he secured permission from his company commander to buy the companies’ noncommissioned officers a keg of beer. “I felt grand because of the braids and held my first speech at the beer bash.”⁷⁸ He made ensign the same year, on August 8. This was the last step before attending war school and becoming an officer. Before war school, however, he had to turn eighteen. He also participated in his first major field maneuver, which gave him hands-on experience with infantry tactics.⁷⁹

76. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 42.

77. Ibid, 42–43.

78. Type-written draft of memoirs, BA-MA, N46/9, fol. 19.

79. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 43.

Groener attended the Engers War School, in the Rhineland north of Coblenz, for ten months in 1885–86.⁸⁰ The school brought him out of Württemberg into the company of ensigns from other regions and arms. Its administration took ability and education into account when making classroom assignments; however, it mixed together students of varying arms and regions in inspection units and quarters, “in order to bring [the officer candidates] closer together [and] hinder the segregation of individual groups.”⁸¹ Groener had already had a small taste of the Rhine and the German Empire beyond Württemberg’s borders, when he had taken his ensign’s exam in Berlin and afterwards spent a week with relatives in Mainz. Now he began to absorb and make this region his own through the many outings that he took. In this geographical context he experienced the officer corps itself as a national institution. Like other eighteen- and nineteen-year-old officer candidates, he spent ten months away from his regiment and *Heimat*, imbibing a sense of national community within the context of his profession.

“My time at the war school was one of the nicest memories of my youth,” he later wrote in his memoirs. He agreed with what “an old war

80. Ibid, 43–44.

81. von Webern, *Die Kriegsschule Metz am Tage ihres 25jährigen Bestehens* (Metz: E. Seifert, 1897), 42.

school comrade” had written to him on his seventieth birthday: “We spent carefree, happy months of our youth there.”⁸² The time at Engers helped Groener to cultivate a sense of independence at an important juncture in his personal development. His sense of independence was reinforced by a strong sense of accomplishment. The school was the last step on his journey to becoming an officer. Moreover, at the end of his war school visit, he alone in his school received a commendation from the Kaiser for his excellent exam results.⁸³

Still eighteen, Groener returned to his regiment, and on September 9, 1886 was promoted to the rank of second lieutenant, with the prestige and privileges that this transition entailed. He spent the next three and a half years in Schwäbisch-Gmünd, where the third battalion of his regiment was located. This town and its officer contingent were so small that the young officers had to socialize with civilian men in a pub in order to gain access to families with young women. Groener so enjoyed the *Stammtisch*, the regulars’ table that he earned the nickname “Nightlight.”⁸⁴

82. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 43.

83. Ibid, 44; *Engers: Zur Feier des 25jährigen Bestehens der Königlichen Kriegsschule* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1888), 103–5.

84. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 44.

In Gmünd he also met his future wife, Helene Geyer. He could not yet marry her, however, because neither his nor her pecuniary circumstances permitted such a course. Her father, Adolf Geyer, was the director of the local gas factory, but he lost his savings in a bad speculation and could not supply a dowry. Groener himself did not make enough money to support a wife until he made captain and reached the second of three pay-levels at this rank. Hence the engagement was long and remained secret.⁸⁵ Even had they wanted to marry immediately, his regimental commander could not give him the required permission. Miss Geyer's social standing was acceptable, for she came from a family with the requisite "cultivation, ethos, and honorability" (*Bildung, Gesittung, and Ehrenhaftigkeit*).⁸⁶ Nonetheless, the two lacked the money to live in a manner befitting their station. Marriage was supposed to reinforce, not endanger, an officer's social position and his corps' sociability and public image.

The battalion was transferred to Ludwigsburg in the spring of 1890, after which Groener socialized more among officers. Since the regiment had no casino until 1892 though, he ate and drank in a pub with unmarried

85. Ibid; Dorothea Groener-Geyer, *General Groener: Soldat und Staatsmann* (Frankfurt a. M.: Societät, 1955), 27.

86. Bergh, *Das deutsche Heer*; 130–31. See also Hughes, *King's Finest*, 98–99, although his assumption that Groener married for money is wrong. On the comparable Bavarian case, see Rümshötel, *Das bayerische Offizierkorps*, 129–44.

officers at a table reserved for his regimental officer corps. He also liked to participate in southern German officers' customary *Frühschoppen*, a morning drink in the pub or casino. At night he and other lieutenants stayed up past closing time and sang.⁸⁷ The young lieutenants' workday leisure and drinking had the merit of allowing the officers to cultivate comradeship and a strong esprit de corps. The bonds of comradeship among officers of the regiment included all those who had earlier served under the regiment's colors. Tradition, comradeship, and esprit de corps were linked. They found expression in the regiment's casino, in which pictures and artifacts were collected. "With the years, every casino becomes a museum, a place of memory (*Erinnerungsstätte*) for history and the former members of the unit," wrote an officer of the 121st Infantry Regiment in 1914. He described the artifacts in detail, in order to keep their memory alive as personnel changes in the regimental officer corps continued. Pictures celebrated the regiment's monarchical ties and heroic deeds in war from a history that reached back to the early eighteenth century.⁸⁸ Groener himself paid tribute to a more recent past by remembering many of his regimental

87. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 49–51; Major Freiherr von Ellrichhausen, "Über die Geschichte des Casinos im Zusammenhang mit der Geschichte des Regiments und seiner Offiziere," Ludwigsburg, 18 Mar. 1914, HStAS, M92, bu. 1.

88. Ibid.

comrades by name in his memoirs.⁸⁹ In an early draft he also recalled the regiment's celebration of its 175th anniversary in 1891.⁹⁰ The cultivation of comradeship and tradition strengthened the regiment's esprit de corps, enhanced its cohesion and morale, and made it a better military instrument.

The officers' sociability also helped to relieve boredom, for most new officers stayed in the regiment at least until they made captain, and promotions came slowly. (It took Groener seven years just to make first lieutenant.⁹¹) The daily and seasonal routines of the regiment were not interesting or difficult enough to occupy all their time and energy. Groener gave us no details about his duties as a second lieutenant. He wrote only that he held two different types of position, company officer in Gmünd, and battalion adjutant in Ludwigsburg. It was normally the duty of the youngest lieutenant in an infantry company to train and drill the new recruits each autumn for his company commander, a captain. The operative word was *Erziehen* (bring up, educate), because the training was supposed to encompass the conscript's whole person. Besides turning recruits into

89. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 41–42, 45–51.

90. Type-written draft, BA-MA, N46/9, fols. 31–32.

91. *Vollständige Dienstaltersliste (Anciennetätsliste) der Offiziere der Königlich Preussischen Armee, des XIII. (Königl. Württemb.) Armeekorps und der Kaiserlichen Schutztruppen mit Angabe des Datums der Patente zu den früheren Dienstgraden, nach den verschiedenen Waffengattungen* (Burg: Hopfer, 1912), 20.

men, that is, disciplined, able soldiers and, if need be, teaching them “respectable” grooming habits and other manners, the lieutenant was supposed to inculcate a monarchical patriotism in them, so they would be prepared to fight both domestic and foreign enemies.⁹² This was no small task for a youth of nineteen or twenty. A battalion adjutant’s position was easier. He functioned as the battalion commander’s assistant and performed most of the routine administrative tasks. Since most important matters were decided at regimental or company level, the battalion commander (a major) and his adjutant had less work to do than officers who worked directly with the troops on an everyday basis.⁹³

During his tenure as adjutant, Groener also studied. In the winter all lieutenants had to undertake so-called *Winterarbeiten*, written military studies assigned by their battalion commander and evaluated by both the battalion and regimental commanders. “The standards were not high, and because the topics were usually assigned without any pedagogical skill, there was almost always a book from which one could copy the essay.”⁹⁴ Groener did not find this type of activity satisfying, so at one point he

92. Descriptions of a lieutenants tasks: A. Dressler, *Über den deutschen Offizier* (Dresden-Weinböhla: Verlag Aurora, 1920), 18–24, 10–11.

93. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 45–49; H. Frobenius, ed., *Militär-Lexikon: Handwörterbuch der Militärwissenschaften* (Berlin: Oldenburg, 1901), 7.

94. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 53.

received permission to give a lecture in the casino instead. His topic was the Battle of Pirot (November 26–27, 1885), in which the Bulgarian Prince Alexander had defeated the Serbian army.⁹⁵ He also took initiative for the 1890–91 Winterarbeit, when he requested a problem from the Franco-German War (1870–71). The result was an ambitious eighty-three page handwritten study entitled, “The Tactics (*Fechtweise*) of the German and French Infantry, Explained with Examples from Individual Battles.” He put so much effort into the essay that he was later able to use it when studying the new infantry regulations of 1888. His battalion commander’s evaluation read, “A very painstaking and successful paper,” and his regimental commander added, “In complete agreement. The author has shown that he has studied the 1870–71 campaign with understanding.”⁹⁶

Lieutenant Groener had not always studied so hard in the officer corps, but after several years “the eternal monotony of line duty [became] marked.”⁹⁷ Another motivation was his career. He and his parents hoped he would enter the famous War Academy in Berlin, and, after that, the General Staff.⁹⁸ His secret engagement also played a role. Successful

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid, 53–54; Groener, type-written draft of memoirs, BA-MA, N46/9, fol. 40; Groener, “Fechtweise,” hand-written manuscript, BA-MA, N46/111.

97. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 47.

98. Groener, type-written draft of memoirs, BA-MA, N46/9, fol. 45.

completion of the War Academy would ensure him not only a career but also more rapid advancement to the rank and pay level required for marriage.

The Prussian War Academy in Berlin opened doors to the highest ranks of the officer corps. Lieutenants who wanted to become General Staff officers, military attachés, or higher adjutants competed on the basis of merit to attend this three-year course in advanced military studies. There was an entrance exam, for which applicants had to prepare on their own time. Moreover, the regimental commander of each applicant had to submit an evaluation, which covered the applicant's practical duty experience and expertise, his suitability for advanced academic study, his health, "whether he was of dependable conduct and firm character," and his financial situation. Applicants had to have held a commission for at least three years and not be due for promotion to captain for at least five more years.⁹⁹ Groener applied at the ideal point in an officer's career, as a new first lieutenant.¹⁰⁰

99. A. Kuhn, *Die Aufnahme-Prüfung für die Kriegs-Akademie: Ein Hilfsmittel zur Vorbereitung für die Kriegs-Akademie und für militärische Uebungs-Reisen: Zugleich eine Aufgaben-Sammlung für militärische Winter-Arbeiten*, 3rd rev. ed. (Berlin: Verlag der Leibelschen Buchhandlung, 1899), 1–7, quote 7; Krafft, *Handbuch für die Vorbereitung zur Kriegsakademie: Zugleich ein Ratgeber für die wissenschaftliche Beschäftigung jüngerer Offiziere*, 2nd rev. ed. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1907), 30–36.

100. He received this commission on Sept. 18, 1893. Patent, BA-MA, N46/26.

Each October the General Staff made the details of the coming entrance exam known, including the historical periods and geographical regions to be covered. In the following spring the exam was administered by General Staff officers at army corps headquarters, Stuttgart in Groener's case. The exam papers were then forwarded to the General Staff in Berlin, which evaluated them and selected the applicants it wanted, by 1902 as many as 133 officers. The exam covered a number of subjects, which were weighted differently in the final score according to their importance. Most important were applied tactics and history. Next came French or mathematics (Groener did the former¹⁰¹), as well as terrain evaluation and map drawing; scores in each of these three subjects were worth three quarters of the scores in the first group. Last came formal tactics, weaponry, fortifications, and geography, each of which was worth half what applied tactics and history were worth. Besides establishing applicants' general knowledge, the exam sought to identify candidates with a promising "faculty of judgment." Hence the exam questions demanded answers that reflected clear and concise analysis.¹⁰² Groener passed this rigorous exam and entered the War Academy in 1893.¹⁰³

101. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 46.

102. Krafft, *Handbuch*, 33–34.

103. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 54.

Making a Career

The Great General Staff was a Prussian military institution, and it was answerable alone to Wilhelm II in his capacity as Prussian king. This fact made it potentially susceptible to both the class and particularistic pressures of the Prussian military nobility. On the other hand, the Great General Staff valued talent and expertise, and it recruited officers from across the Reich. If Groener succeeded in the War Academy and showed he had the right military bearing, he could pursue a career on a national scale. Whether or not he could reach the center of Prussian-German military decision making, however, was another matter. To what extent was the direction and extent of his antebellum General Staff career influenced by his social and regional background? What role did his military ability play?

The War Academy attracted the army's best young officers from across the Reich (except for Bavaria, which had its own academy). In 1894, the three classes of War Academy students included 140 noblemen (52%) and 130 commoners (48%). Thirty-five (13%) of the officers came from prestigious and overwhelmingly aristocratic guards regiments. Such figures suggest that the principle of merit received uneven application in the Reich. Part of the noble preponderance was due to the War Academy's other major

constituency: future adjutants to Wilhelm II and other royals; however, the proximity of the guards units to Berlin and the informal networks among Prussia's military noble families helped tip the balance in favor of noblemen who were not necessarily the best qualified for advanced military study. That said, however, the War Academy and General Staff suffered no fools. Family connections opened doors for some men, but they did not guarantee success. Moreover, the War Academy favored the admission of officers from its most important arm, the infantry, which contributed 63% of lieutenants in the three classes attending the War Academy in 1894. The artillery contributed 26% of the War Academy students that year, while the cavalry only managed 10%, a number that was high in relation to its military value, but low in relation to its prestige. Attending the War Academy that year were also two commoners from pioneer battalions (combat engineers) and one commoner from a railroad regiment. Finally, eleven (4%) students came from the Württemberg contingent.¹⁰⁴ The principle of merit did not obtain perfectly in the War Academy admissions process, but it was powerful nonetheless.

Groener took mainly military courses during his three year program at the war academy. At the center of his curriculum lay tactics and military

104. *Rang- und Quartier-Liste der Königlich Preussischen Armee*, 1894.

history, whereby the latter emphasized tactical and operational training. He also took courses in fortifications, military transportation, topography and map-making, military health maintenance, General Staff duties, as well as governmental administration and law with international law. Besides in these professional areas of competence, Groener received instruction in history, geography, and Russian. He did well in his courses, but he was in no danger of being labeled a *Streber*, an over-achieving eager beaver, which could have undermined comradeship. During his three years he earned four excellents, six very goods, twelve goods, and one satisfactory.¹⁰⁵ The War Academy curriculum was supplemented by practical training during the summer break, which lasted some four months. Officers were sent to other branches of the army for cross-training as well as for practical experience in such tasks as surveying and transportation. Authorities supported this training by sending officers to units where they fit in socially and culturally. As an infantry officer, Groener requested assignments with the 29th Field Artillery and 25th Dragoons (cavalry) in Ludwigsburg, which enabled him to live with his mother and save money, and also put him reasonably near

105. "Abgangszeugnis," 31 Oct. 1896, BA-MA, N46/26; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 57; "Streberliste" and "Der Streber: Eine naturwissenschaftliche Studie," in *Kriegsakademie, Höhepunkt 1893 Fest-Kalender* (n.p.: H. Winkler, 1893), no pagination; *Zur Erinnerung an das 100jährigen Bestehen der Kriegsakademie 1810–1910* (Berlin: G. Heinicke, 1910), illustration opposite p. 34.

his fiancé. He recalled that he particularly enjoyed the 25th Dragoons, to whom he enjoyed connections through his recently deceased, widely respected father.

Groener's assignment to the Prussian War Academy did more than impart knowledge. He now lived in a major European metropolis, where he was quick to follow the advice of the academy's director, Lieutenant General von Brauchitsch, who told the students to make sure they enjoyed the many "pleasures of the city." Groener grew to love Berlin because of its "independent way of life. One was openly free and did not have to consider any of the provincial commitments; if one did not like his apartment any longer, one easily found another: There was plenty of choice."¹⁰⁶ This example symbolized a new way of life upon which he thrived. A cousin introduced him into Berlin families, and a veterinarian friend of his, Robert Ostertag, introduced him to a circle of Swabian acquaintances, which met regularly.¹⁰⁷ Less attractive was court society, which contrasted sharply with his own existence as well as his experience with Württemberg royalty. "I had hoped for a grand experience," Groener recalled of his single visit to a court ball, "but I was actually quite disappointed. One saw many people in

106. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 55.

107. *Ibid.*, 55–56.

wonderful uniforms, beautiful women in splendid dresses [and] glittering jewelry, but everything made the impression of a theater performance.” Guards officers performed elegant dances with the ladies before the court, but “we poor line officers were excluded from these circles.” Instead, he and his companion walked around and enjoyed the spectacle and the buffet.¹⁰⁸

As a War Academy student, Groener began to acquire the habits and mores of a General Staff officer. Besides the work, he experienced the comradeship of others who had been chosen to earn a chance to lead the German army. Another General Staff officer, Bernhard Schwertfeger, later wrote that individual officers could not achieve the same level of camaraderie to which they were accustomed in their own regiments, because the War Academy was too big. Such convivial relationships tended to be limited to officers who already knew each other, but also to officers from the same lecture hall.¹⁰⁹ A special connection also seems to have existed among men of the same year.¹¹⁰ Significantly, one of Groener’s

108. Ibid, 56–57.

109. Bernhard Schwertfeger, *Die grossen Erzieher des deutschen Heeres: Aus der Geschichte der Kriegsakademie* (Potsdam: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1936), 69.

110. Kriegsakademie, *Höhepunkt 1893*; Kriegsakademie, *Kalender des Hörsaales B, 1898–1901* (N.p.: n.p, [ca. 1900]); Kriegsakademie, *Kriegsakademie: 1900 Ia–IIIa 1903* (N.p.: R. Zumppe, [ca. 1902]); Kriegsakademie, *Culminationsfest Hoersaal IIB 1905–1908* (N.p.: n.p, [ca. 1907]); Kriegsakademie, *Höhepunktfeier 4. April 1908* (Berlin: G. Heinicke, 1908); Kriegsakademie (Hörsaal B), *Hörsaalkalender des Jahrganges 1911–14* (N.p.: n.p, [ca. 1913]); Kriegsakademie, *21. März 1914 Hörsaal IIa: 1912–1914* (N.p.: n.p, 1914).

classmates was Hans von Seeckt, who assumed leadership of the army from Hindenburg and Groener in autumn 1919. While Groener's papers gave no indication of a personal relationship with Seeckt, their military camaraderie, professional courtesy, and mutual respect must have dated back to their three-year course of studies in the War Academy.¹¹¹ In any case, Groener mentioned Seeckt's own simultaneous accelerated promotion to general at the same time Groener and Gerhard Tappen, chief of the Operations Section, received theirs.¹¹² Evidence of a special esprit de corps among the socially and regionally diverse student body was in the commemorative books that each class published at the midpoint of its second year in connection with the Culmination Party, when its three-year course was half over.¹¹³ Intended for a private audience, these books did not celebrate the students in the pious manner of a regimental history. Instead the books included much material that was raucous and rude, comparable to a winter carnival in Cologne. Accompanying an illustration of a jester was the following text:

111. *Rang- und Quartier-Liste der Königlich Preussischen Armee*, 1894 and 1897.

112. Diary and letter to wife, 26 June 1915, quoted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 270, 538.

113. *Kriegsakademie, Höhepunkt 1893*; *Kriegsakademie, Höhepunktfeier 4. April 1908*; *Kriegsakademie, 21. März 1914 Hörsaal IIa*; *Kriegsakademie, Kriegsakademie: 1900 Ia–IIIa 1903*; *Kriegsakademie, Kalender des Hörsaales B, 1898–1901*; *Kriegsakademie, Culminationsfest Hörsaal IIB 1905–1908*; *Kriegsakademie (Hörsaal B), Hörsaalkalender 1911–14*.

He draws nigh, and from under the man's clothes
His laughing countenance looks out,
The truest friend in amusement and affliction. . . .
With a fool's clothes a fool's right!¹¹⁴

The commemorative books cultivated comradeship and esprit de corps through satirical verse, contemporary jokes, caricatures of students and instructors, as well as humorous portraits of urban life, student exploits in the academy, and the General Staff duties that awaited them. The lengths to which this humor could go was demonstrated at the 1910 celebration of the War Academy's hundredth anniversary. Before an audience of academy alumni, who included the highest officers in the land, the students performed skits, which required these lieutenants to play roles such as "Clementine," "Edith and her niece," "Minna," "Marie," "six women dancers," and members of the "Tyrolean Ladies Band."¹¹⁵ This comradeship was essential to the smooth functioning of the General Staff and its effective communication with General Staff officers in line units.

Groener graduated from the War Academy in July 1896 and returned to the 121st Infantry Regiment, whose uniform he had now been wearing for twelve years. On April 1, 1897 he was attached to the General Staff in

114. *Kriegsakademie, Höhepunkt 1893*, no pagination.

115. "Jubiläumsfeier der Kriegsakademie," program located inside the front cover of *Festschrift zur Hundertjahrfeier der Kriegsakademie*, BA-BA Library, Heft 531.

Berlin, which meant he changed his place of duty, but not his regiment or uniform.¹¹⁶

Groener's first assignment was both a training and trial period. He began his practical training in the Topographical Section, which along with the Railroad Section was one of the most labor-intensive sections of the General Staff, but which was also where Moltke the Elder had started his General Staff career. After a month of training in Berlin, he and other lieutenants were sent to record the topography of the region around Lüneburg. Although the army employed professional topographers, potential General Staff officers were required to experience first-hand the relationship between maps and the land, a necessary prerequisite to true topographic literacy. Maps might otherwise seduce officers into drawing faulty conclusions. Groener did this work for two summers. In the winter he drew maps and also solved tactical problems, like all lieutenants in the General Staff. Groener did not do well with the tactical exercises during the first winter, but he did during the second, when he also worked in the Railroad Section, which always needed extra hands. He found this work interesting, because he learned about the links between the railway and deployment for war. With little previous knowledge about railroads, he did

116. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 66.

well in his tasks. On March 25, 1899 he was promoted to Captain and transferred to a regular assignment in the Railroad Section, and he put on the crimson stripes of a General Staff officer.¹¹⁷ The Chief of the General Staff at this time was Alfred von Schlieffen.

The contingent of lieutenants attached to the General Staff with Groener in 1897 was only 37% as big as the group of lieutenants enrolled in the War Academy in 1894, which indicated a competitive process. Of those remaining, the nobility fared well, providing 57% of officers attached to the General Staff. Guards units even managed 16% of the total. The cavalry's representation was much higher than it had been in the War Academy in 1894, 24% (instead of 10%), while the infantry and artillery provided 49% and 23% respectively. Only two lieutenants (1%) were from the Württemberg contingent.¹¹⁸ This overrepresentation of the nobility declined significantly before the war. If only 46% of regular General Staff officers were commoners in 1909, 62% were commoners in 1914, when commoners also predominated at the level of section chief.¹¹⁹

117. Ibid, 66–68. Topography in the Great General Staff: Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*. Topographic literacy more generally: Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1996).

118. These statistics include all lieutenants attached to the Great General Staff in 1897, not just those entering with Groener; *Rang- und Quartier-Liste der Königlich Preussischen Armee* (1894 and 1897).

119. *Rangliste der Königlich Preussischen Armee und des XIII. (Königlich Württembergischen) Armeekorps* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1909–14).

On August 18, 1899, Groener received permission to marry Helene Geyer. The wedding was on October 14 in Schwäbisch-Gmünd, after a wait of over nine years. Their daughter, Dorothea, was born on December 12, 1900, when Helene was about thirty-six. No more children came from this marriage.¹²⁰

After Groener's promotion to captain, his career followed that of a typical General Staff officer. He progressed through levels of skill and responsibility in his assigned section, the Railroad Section, and he alternated these assignments with tours in line units. The General Staff rotated officers to give them a diverse range of hands-on experiences and cultivate their leadership qualities. Rotation also promoted the dissemination of the General Staff's teachings on war planning and tactics to the rest of the officer corps, and it fostered the transformation of the army into a national institution.

Captain Groener commanded an infantry company in Metz in the 98th Infantry Regiment (1902–4), and Major Groener held a staff assignment at XIII Corps headquarters in Stuttgart (1908–10), before he took a battalion command with the 125th Infantry Battalion in Stuttgart (1910–11). Likewise, in the Great General Staff Captain Groener worked

120. Personalakten II, HStAS, M430/2, bu. 695, Wilhelm Groener.

out mobilization timetables in the Railroad Section for a specific railway line. Under a new Chief of the General Staff, the younger Helmuth von Moltke, Major Groener was head of Section IIa in the Railroad Section, which was responsible for deploying the armies in the West. He also spent two months attached to VII Corps Headquarters in Münster for fall maneuvers, and he spent a month with the fleet for spring maneuvers. Finally, Lieutenant Colonel Groener was Chief of the Railroad Section (1912–14) until war was declared, when he became Chief of Field Railways.¹²¹

Late in life, Groener suggested in confidence to others that he had felt “shunted off” (*abgeschoben*) to the Railroad Section because of his modest social background.¹²² He implied that the Operations Section was the most important one, because it planned the army’s mobilization and deployment, whereas the Railroad Section was merely work intensive and enjoyed little prestige. While it is true that nobles predominated in the General Staff

121. Ibid.

122. Groener made these remarks to Heinrich Brüning in the spring of 1932, shortly before Groener was forced out of office and Brüning’s government collapsed. Brüning, *Memoiren 1918–1934* (Stuttgart: Deutscher Bücherbund, 1970), 548; quoted in Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener*, 7. Groener repeated these remarks to Brüning’s friend, Sir John W. Wheeler-Bennett, a well-connected Briton who had spent many years in interwar Germany breeding horses and hobnobbing with the country’s leading politicians. Wheeler-Bennett, *Knaves, Fools and Heroes: In Europe between the Wars* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974), 56–57.

during Groener's first years in it, Groener displayed no such feelings of dissatisfaction before the war. Indeed, he derived pride from the recognition he received for his work from the Chief of the General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke (the Younger).¹²³ The connection Groener later drew between his social background and his not being assigned to the Operations Section was disingenuous, the product of fourteen years of personal attacks in the Weimar period by people on the far right, including former comrades. Groener's assignment in the General Staff had been related to his military performance. While he had received top notes in tactics in his last two years of the War Academy, his performance in tactical exercises during his first trial year in the General Staff had been unexceptional.¹²⁴ Moreover, the Operations Section was headed only by commoners after 1898.¹²⁵ Groener was not kept from this section by either his ability or social background. Bavarian General Staff officers who had been attached to the Great General Staff informed the Chief of the Bavarian General Staff that while the most important work was done in the Operations Section, this would never be handed over to a non-Prussian. Hence, they pointed to the significance of

123. Letter from Wilhelm Groener to Helene Groener, Freiburg i. Schl., 10 Sept. 1913, in BA-MA, N46/D.

124. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 67.

125. Trümpener, "Junkers and Others," 33–34.

the Railroad Section, in particular those parts that dealt directly with mobilization and deployment. These officers recommended that when the Bavarian minister of war negotiated specific assignments for its officers in Berlin, it should aim for placements in the Railroad Section. There were other interesting sections too, of course, including those that dealt with intelligence, military history, and maneuvers; in the last section one could easily gain the recognition of the Kaiser. Most important, however, were the Operations and Railroad Sections, which were most directly involved in German War planning.¹²⁶ Groener's assignment to the Railroad Section of the General Staff placed him near the center of German war planning.

Groener's antebellum military career points to the inadequacy of those historiographical interpretations that emphasize the officer corps' "feudal" quality, its supposed outdatedness and unprofessionalism. Groener's selection, training, and career was the product of the Imperial German officer corps' professionalism, which manifested itself in specific educational

126. Kommandierungen, Bayerische Hauptstaatsarchiv, Abt. IV, Kriegsarchiv, Munich (BHStA, KA), Generalstab 310.

prerequisites, formalized training, and a semi-transparent promotion system that rewarded a mixture of seniority and talent in a reasonably consistent manner. While Groener's social origins were more modest and his prewar career more successful than many, his professional advancement was by no means an anomaly. If he remained an outsider to the social goings-on of the Hohenzollern court and aristocratic regiments and households, he had become a consummate representative of the brain and central nervous system of the national officer corps, the Great General Staff. At the same time, he had significant leadership and command experience in infantry line units, where he trained soldiers as a freshly commissioned lieutenant, and commanded and mentored officers as a company and battalion commander. These varied experiences colored his deportment, dispositions, and self-concept in significant ways. So too did his social background. The cultural implications of his upbringing and career are analyzed in the next chapter.

2. The Right Stuff

What impact did Wilhelm Groener's upbringing and profession have on his cultural orientations and self-concept? What was he like before the Great War? An answer cannot neglect the still influential feudal interpretation of the officer corps.

To the extent that "feudal" means "absurdly outdated," "archaic," or simply "unprofessional," Groener's prewar career spotlights the inadequacy of the feudalization thesis for understanding the officer corps. Indeed, the character of General Staff work and career paths has led sociologists Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz to offer a powerful alternative to the feudal interpretation of the officer corps. From a functional perspective, they argue that the ethos of officers was shaped by what officers did, not their social backgrounds or the social background of their predominant social group.¹ This approach highlights distinctive features of officering in comparison to other professions, and it provides a usable framework for comparing different officer corps. Nonetheless, it has never supplanted the feudalization thesis, because its functional determinism cannot explain the

1. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*; Janowitz, *Professional Soldier*. Cf. Strachan, *Politics of the British Army*.

Wilhelmine officer corps' distinctive, seemingly "feudal" ethos. Here the term "feudal" refers not to the officer corps' "modernity" but to its otherness. Because the Imperial German officer corps was monarchical and characterized by a heightened sensibility for honor, it was somehow the antithesis of bourgeois, that is, noble or feudal.² This emphasis still entails problematic normative assumptions about how societies develop and what a "modern" officer corps "should" have looked like, but here "feudal" refers to the supposed adoption by bourgeois officers of "noble" values and mores. This interpretation acknowledges the increasing numerical preponderance of commoners in the officer corps, but it claims that these commoners did nothing to change the officer corps' culture. The apparent otherness and continuity of Wilhelmine military culture in the face of its changing social composition is attributed not to its professionalism and strong military culture, but rather to the obsequious behavior of commoners in the face of atavistic noblemen.

2. Prominent examples include Endres, "Soziologische Struktur und ihr entsprechende Ideologien"; Kehr, "Zur Genesis des Königlich Reserveoffiziers"; Kehr, "Klassenkämpfe und Rüstungspolitik"; Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*; Holger H. Herwig, "Soziale Herkunft und wissenschaftliche Vorbildung des Seeoffizierkorps der Kaiserliche Marine vor 1914," *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 2.1 (1971): 81–112; Herwig, *German Naval Officer Corps*.

Groener's career illustrates how young men entering the officer corps indeed went through a far-reaching process of acculturation. Officers were molded within a military culture that differed markedly from civilian life, and this culture drew on martial traditions from the past. Our understanding of this process, however, is distorted by the concept of feudalization. Noble culture and military culture had common roots and a long, intertwined history, but we cannot assume that one was synonymous with the other, especially not given the diversity of the nobility as well as the enormous changes that war-making had undergone as a consequence of the early modern military revolutions, the political and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the accompanying professionalization of the officer corps.³ We need to distinguish between organizational cultures and class cultures, that is, between the officer corps' military culture (and subcultures), on the one

3. D. J. B. Trim, ed., *The Chivalric Ethos and the Development of Military Professionalism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003); Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Dominic Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815–1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Reif, *Geschichte des deutschen Adels*; M. S. Anderson, *War and Society in Europe of the Old Regime, 1618–1789* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); Geoffrey Best, *War and Society in Revolutionary Europe, 1770–1870* (1982; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982); Brian Bond, *War and Society in Europe, 1870–1970* (1983; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998); Jeremy Black, *European Warfare, 1494–1660* (London: Routledge, 2002); Jeremy Black, *European Warfare, 1660–1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Geoffrey Wawro, *Warfare and Society in Europe, 1792–1914* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

hand, and the bourgeois and noble cultures in which officers grew up and lived, on the other hand.⁴ Military and class cultures did not exist in isolation from each other, but each informed the practices of officers in different, if complementary ways.

This chapter analyzes Groener's cultural orientations in relation to both his social and professional background. First it examines those dispositions of Groener's that the historiography now associates with the Kaiserreich's diverse bourgeoisie. The chapter then focuses on Groener's military self-concept. Groener was not a mere object of impersonal social and cultural forces. Hence, along the way, this chapter also sketches important aspects of his personality that he revealed before the war in his publications and correspondence with his wife.

Bourgeois Culture

The feudal interpretation of the officer corps is related to the post-World-War-Two interpretive tradition of the German *Sonderweg* (special path),

4. Geyer, "Past as Future"; Stoneman, "Bürgerliche und adlige Krieger." A useful analysis of scholarship on contemporary military and organizational culture: Allan D. English, *Understanding Military Culture: A Canadian Perspective* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004). See also Williamson Murray, "Does Military Culture Matter?" *Orbis* 43.1 (1999): 27–42. (This issue of *Orbis* also contains contributions on U.S. military culture by John Hillen, Harvey Sicherman, and Don M. Snider.)

which attributed the horrible turn that German history took in the first half of the twentieth century to the absence of “normal” social, economic, and political structures in Germany. According to this reading, Germany’s powerful nobility should have become largely irrelevant over the course of the nineteenth century, while the bourgeoisie should have rebelled against atavistic social and political structures and established a liberal constitutional system. Germany derailed because a pugnacious nobility and a subservient bourgeoisie refused to fulfill their assigned missions.⁵ The Sonderweg, however, has been undermined in the past few decades by other theoretical perspectives and new empirical evidence. Leaving the embrace of modernization theory and antecedent whiggish notions of human progress, historians emphasize the importance of culture and contingency.⁶ Particularly significant are the many studies of the German bourgeoisie that have appeared since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Far from being

5. Classic accounts include Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); Gordon A. Craig, *Germany, 1866–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973). Recent criticism and historical explanation of this interpretation: Dieter Hertz-Eichenrode, “Die Feudalisierungsthese—ein Rückblick,” *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 89 (2002), 265–87.

6. James Retallack, *Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm II* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996); Chris Lorenz, “Beyond Good and Evil? The German Empire of 1871 and Modern German Historiography,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30.4 (1995): 729–65; Roger Chickering, “The Quest for a Usable German Empire,” in Chickering, *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*, 1–12. See also the flourishing H-Soz-u-Kult, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de>.

assimilated by the nobility, and despite social, economic, and political divisions, the German bourgeoisie was characterized by a vibrant, self-confident, and assertive class culture, which the German historiography calls *Bürgerlichkeit*.⁷

According to this research, bourgeois culture was characterized by an emphasis on individual industriousness, achievement, and success. These values manifested themselves in the male bourgeois professional career. Education was prerequisite to this career, but it was also a value in itself; it was essential to the individuals' personal development and social standing. Connected with this positive attitude towards learning was a "rational" approach to life, a critical attitude towards received customs, and independent thinking. Finally, the bourgeoisie idealized the nuclear family, which was not simply an extension of one's economic basis, life-style, and status, but appeared private and affective, complete in and of itself. It provided the emotional framework within which individuals developed their

7. Useful summaries of the literature include Jonathan Sperber, "Bürger, Bürgertum, Bürgerlichkeit, Bürgerliche Gesellschaft: Studies of the German (Upper) Middle Class and Its Sociocultural World," *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 271–97; Peter Lundgreen, ed., *Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des Bürgertums: Eine Bilanz des Bielefelder Sonderforschungsbereichs (1986–1997)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2000); Mergel, "Die Bürgertumsforschung."

personalities and served as an important counterbalance to the male bourgeois individualistic public sphere.⁸

Groener's cultural orientations comported with this sketch. His antebellum General Staff career testified to the importance he placed on personal industriousness, achievement, and success. Alone, his assignment in the Railroad Section was not for the work-shy.⁹ Nor were some of his other duties. On a 1909 VII Corps General Staff trip in Württemberg, he wrote from Heilbronn to his wife,

One does not get around to letter-writing on a General Staff trip very easily, at least not my sort, because as the leader of one party I have quite a lot of work to do. For example, yesterday afternoon after my return from outdoors, except for $\frac{3}{4}$ hour bed rest, hustle and bustle until supper and after supper from 10:00 in the evening until 3:00 in the morning.

He praised one officer who was "very diligent and worked attentively almost without respite," and criticized another who "since yesterday morning is loafing in Stuttgart with coffee and cake."¹⁰ Not all of Groener's assignments were so strenuous. A battalion command in Stuttgart in 1910–11 left him with extra time, which he used to write about military matters.

8. Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1987), 43–44; Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 1:43–49, 382–95; David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans, eds., *The German Bourgeoisie: Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), 9.

9. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 78–82.

10. Wilhelm Groener to Helene Geyer, Heilbronn, 13 June 1909, BA-MA, N46/D.

He published several articles in the *Schwäbischer Merkur* (a Stuttgart daily of National-Liberal coloration), one in the *Grenzboten* (a weekly journal of politics and culture, of Free Conservative, semi-governmental coloration), and several more in the *Militär-Wochenblatt* and the *Stuttgarter militärische Blätter* (both professional military periodicals, the former official).¹¹ In a piece on the increasing number of Württemberg officers assigned to Prussian regiments, he described being an officer as a career. He praised the broadened professional horizons and increased career opportunities that such assignments gave Württembergers. “Our Württemberg officer corps can no longer manage without higher officers being posted to Prussia, not if we want to be in a position to offer capable officers a successful career path and promote healthy aspirations for advancement.”¹² Hard work beyond Württemberg’s borders led to Groener becoming Chief of the Railroad Section in 1912.

The high value that he placed on his industry and achievements manifested itself in a strong need for recognition from others. In his memoirs, Groener remembered, “I was never a model student, but I did once

11. Civilian Wilhelmine newspapers: Klaus Wernecke, *Der Wille zur Weltgeltung: Aussenpolitik und Öffentlichkeit im Kaiserreich am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1970), 317–24.

12. Wilhelm Groener, “Kommandierung württ. Offiziere nach Preussen,” *Schwäbischer Merkur* (1911), BA-MA, N46/78, fols. 1–2.

receive a school prize.” He told this tale to honor a teacher who had let him get by without learning much Latin, but the prize also meant something to Groener, who emphasized that he had excelled in math and modern languages.¹³ His prize certificate survived in his papers, as did his certificate for the one-year-volunteer privilege.¹⁴ The importance that recognition held for Groener was also evinced in the survival of a single scrap of paper from his father’s correspondence. Its author appears to have been a first lieutenant attending the War Academy in Berlin. The occasion was the younger Groener’s performance at the Engers War School. “I congratulate you on your son’s excellent examination. His inspection officer, First Lieutenant Gühler, is in my lecture hall and told me that there has not been an exam as excellent as your son’s for many years. First Lieutenant Gühler praised him highly in every other respect as well.”¹⁵ Receiving recognition from his father must have been particularly gratifying: his relationship to his parents had been strained for many years while he was still in school because of a beating his father once gave him when his mother thought he had lied. Groener also recalled in his memoirs the positive feedback he

13. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 33–34.

14. “Belobigungs-Urkunde,” 17 Sept. 1877, and “Zeugniss behufs der Meldung zum einjährig freiwilligen Militärdienst,” 22 Sept. 1882, BA-MA, N46/26.

15. Hand-written fragment of letter, BA-MA, N46/26.

received for a lecture he had given while still a lieutenant: “This assignment made me happy; I drew maps for it and received the recognition of my audience.”¹⁶

This need for external validation, however, did not translate into a desire to win popularity contests. Groener was a warm and sociable man, but he recalled in his memoirs that he preferred small gatherings of friends and comrades to big formal festivities. Throughout his life, he also joined a predominantly civilian *Stammtisch* (a table at the local pub for regulars) wherever he lived.¹⁷ Despite his gregariousness, he remained reticent at formal military gatherings, which worried his wife. In a letter to her after the Kaiser Maneuvers in 1913, he mentioned praise he had received from various quarters,

because you sometimes have said to me that I should not be so reserved [*mich zurückhalten*] at all celebrations and such, and instead make myself noticed [*mein Licht an den Mann bringen*]. Sweetheart, I don’t need to do that, because now I have gained ample recognition through my work as Chief of the Railroad Section.

Recognition came not least from the Chief of the General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke (the younger), but also from other quarters, including for a

16. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 53.

17. Ibid, 45, 67, 81–82. Groener’s strong resemblance to his mother (Kabisch, *Groener*, photographs opposite p. 16) adds significance to his brief description of her temperament: “Especially my mother had life experience [*Lebensklugheit*] and cheerfulness. She was the gentler and happier of both parents.” *Lebenserinnerungen*, 33.

speech he gave before the budget commission of the Reichstag in connection with the new armaments bill. “I am delighted by this and hope that in the future my work will continue to be accompanied by success.”¹⁸

Prerequisite to his career success was his general education at Gymnasium and his advanced military studies at the War Academy. Moreover, Groener valued education (*Bildung*) in the same broad sense as Germany’s bourgeoisie at large—as something that formed and lent distinction to one’s character. His itinerary for his first trip abroad spoke volumes. While still a lieutenant he won a lottery. After paying off his clothing debts, he had enough money to visit Strasbourg in Alsace (then Germany) and Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. “I climbed Rigi in the fog, had a look at Lucerne, and went to Altdorf, on the Rütli, and to Küsnacht—all in honor of Schiller,” a figure of immense importance to educated Germany.¹⁹ His interest in *Bildung* also manifested itself in his prewar publications. In one he argued that German officers could benefit by contracting with foreign governments as military instructors. Besides gaining fluency in foreign languages, they could learn lessons that made

18. Wilhelm Groener to Helene Groener, Freiburg i.Schl., 10 Sept. 1913, BA-MA, N46/D.

19. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 38; Rainer Nolténus, *Dichterfeiern in Deutschland: Rezeptionsgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte am Beispiel der Schiller- und Freiligrath-Feiern* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1984).

them better people. “Out of the narrowness and pettiness of daily garrison life [and] into new circumstances, new surroundings, faced with new, interesting tasks. What more could we wish for? . . . Only through comparisons does one learn!”²⁰ He himself began an article on the military’s role in the Kaiserreich from a comparative perspective. Russia used its military to put down a revolution, and Turkey introduced sweeping changes in society through its military. Besides demonstrating conversance in international developments, Groener quoted contemporary works of nonfiction, such as the late Berlin historian Heinrich von Treitschke’s *Politik* and Strasbourg philosopher and pedagogue Theobald Ziegler’s *Die geistigen und sozialen Strömungen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Intellectual and Social Trends of the Nineteenth Century).²¹

Integral to Groener’s appreciation of *Bildung* were other typical characteristics of bourgeois culture: a “rational” approach to life, a critical attitude towards received customs, and independent thinking. In a 1911 article in the *Militär-Wochenblatt* about physical education in the army, he greeted some new regulations as a step forward. Formal drills had been

20. Wilhelm Groener, “Deutsche Offiziere als Instruktoren in fremden Armeen,” *Schwäbischer Merkur* (1911), in BA-MA N46/78, fol.60; see also Groener, “Kommandierung württ. Offiziere.”

21. Groener, “Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens im Staate,” *Schwäbischer Merkur* (1911), in BA-MA, N46/78, fol. 68.

emphasized, while “its main significance for military education and tactical training had been underestimated.” Now competitions were allowed. Nonetheless, “the moral imponderables of physical education deserved even more emphasis in the new draft, especially along the lines that moral and educational success is fostered primarily through an informal, sport-like manner of physical education.” He emphasized the need for training that would promote “independent initiative” [*Selbsttätigkeit*] in battle. Content mattered, not mere form.²²

He also emphasized the need to match actions with their purposes in his domestic life. In the summer of 1908 during a trip to Paris, he wrote to his wife, who was staying in Gmünd with her parents.²³ Helene had apparently complained about being tired and not having proper help. Groener chided her for having let their servant in Berlin go before she and Dorothea had left the city: “and if you had left before the end of the month, then we just would have paid the girl to the end of the month. I just find on occasions that your thrift sometimes misses the mark.” He did not feel she should take the Swabian emphasis on savings too far in Gmünd either. Indeed, she needed to stand up to her mother, who apparently did not see

22. Groener, “Das Turnen im Heere,” *Militär-Wochenblatt* 96.61 (1911): 1415–17.

23. He probably was in France ostensibly for his French, but likely to observe French railroad facilities.

her as a major's wife and mother of an eight-year-old daughter. "We've known for a long time that you don't get any real rest at home. Your parents can't see this, because you've never spoken frankly about it at home. Your mother should finally get a girl who is suitable." Groener was skeptical about the "harvest girl" his mother-in-law wanted to hire. "Has she ever even served in a good house? Don't let yourself get mixed up in taking a girl away from the plow or cow barn."²⁴ These comments also showed clearly where he thought he was located in Germany's social hierarchy: the urban middle class.

While middle-class respectability was important for Groener, he disapproved of following custom merely for custom's sake. Indeed, he had a noticeable independent streak. In the same letter he wrote,

It was beautiful in Versailles yesterday. I liked the splendid grounds almost better than I did the palace. That would be a place for you and Dodo. Woods and parks all around. The woods sometimes so dense, that no sunshine gets through. Sitting and lying all around are women [and] nannies with children, who play undisturbed on the paths and lawns. The ladies also don't allow themselves to be disturbed by strangers. They remain as they are, seated or laying down, according to my principle, 'one cannot make anything go away by looking at it.' In Germany the ladies would rapidly improve their position, straighten out their clothes, and fix their eyes on the underworld, as soon as they heard steps on the gravel. No one thinks about doing that here. No one even looks. It is all just a matter of course, so that no one except the foreigner, that is, primarily the German, notices, because the other peoples are in this sense used to

24. Wilhelm Groener to Helene Groener, Paris, 1 Aug. 1908, BA-MA, N46/D.

more freedom [*die Grössere Freiheit des Menschen*]. The day before yesterday—a delightful scene that perhaps none of the many people there noticed, except for me, the German. In one of the loveliest and biggest rooms of the painting gallery—a young woman from the middle class [*Bürgerstand*], well dressed, with family members, is sitting on a bench and peacefully nourishing her baby. Her dress was arranged very well, as it was hardly noticeable. At the same time, hundreds of people walked past without looking at her. In Germany she would certainly have been looked at, perhaps even arrested for indecency. In any case, a German mother would have let her child cry until she reached a protected location. The Frenchwoman found the Louvre to be the right place.²⁵

These approving comments presaged the sentiments he expressed in his 1911 article on German officers broadening their horizons through foreign service.²⁶ This theme informed him throughout his life. Over twenty years later, he recalled in his memoirs the positive impact that seeing new parts of culturally diverse Germany had had on him as a lieutenant attached to the map section of the Great General Staff. “In this way the topographer’s work brought a certain widening of perspective in one’s knowledge of land and people, and one developed a freer conception of life.”²⁷

Groener’s writings also showed how important the nuclear family was to him. He described the apparently attractive mothers, nannies, and children, among whom his wife and daughter would have felt at home. The nuclear family formed the emotional counterpart to his professional life. His

25. Ibid.

26. Groener, “Deutsche Offiziere als Instruktoren.”

27. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 67.

suggestion that his wife stand up to her mother also presupposed the primacy of the nuclear family over the extended family. When he celebrated his 30th anniversary in the army on November 21, 1914, when the Great War was still only few month's old, he wrote Helene, "I am thankful for the Providence that has given me such a good lot in my profession [*Beruf*]. Above all else, however, I must thank you, for I never would have attained what I have in my career [*Beruf*], if you had not been my true companion on all paths since my lieutenant days."²⁸ Years later his daughter Dorothea complained that her father had forbidden her to go to Gymnasium, which was prerequisite to university, because he felt she only needed to learn cooking. He could not imagine her doing anything other than getting married and running a household.²⁹ That is what he had experienced in his own generation. In his memoirs he recalled friends from his school days who had been raised too strictly, but "who all became good people, warm-hearted women and professionally capable men."³⁰ This statement recalled the gender order that lay at the heart of bourgeois culture.

28. Quoted in Groener-Geyer, *General Groener: Soldat und Staatsmann*, 30.

29. Groener-Geyer, "Kurt von Schleicher privat," unfinished typewritten manuscript, 13–14, BA-MA, N46/D, 13–14.

30. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 34.

Because Groener was no outsider in the military, his affinity with bourgeois culture poses a significant challenge for the feudal interpretation of the officer corps. How can we explain his bourgeois cultural orientations? First, as deep as his professional military acculturation reached, it could not erase the formative impact that his upbringing and education had made on him.³¹ Second, recent studies show that military service was central to bourgeois notions of masculinity, self, and citizenship.³² Pace the feudalization thesis, bourgeois and military culture were by no means incompatible. The shift in the meaning of *Bildung* over the course of the nineteenth century is a case in point. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ziegler observed,

today anyway we understand something superior and more comprehensive than a certain sum of knowledge (*Kenntnissen*); knowledge (*Wissen*) alone does not do it anymore. That is related to a general trend. We value men of willpower and action (*Willens- und Tatenmenschen*) differently, much more highly than at the beginning of the [nineteenth] century, when the German had to defend himself against such men of action as his worst enemy. In this connection, Bismarck, the great man of willpower and action, represented a turning point in our national life and sensibility . . .³³

31. Bourdieu, *Distinction*. Note too the consistency with which Goener's bourgeois cultural orientations manifested themselves in both his prewar writings (public and private) and the memoirs he wrote near the end of his life; see the notes above in this section.

32. Frevert, *Ehrenmänner*; Frevert, *Militär und Gesellschaft*; Frevert, *Die kasernierte Nation*; Becker, *Bilder von Krieg und Nation*; Schilling, *Kriegshelden*.

33. Theobald Ziegler, *Die geistigen und sozialen Strömungen Deutschlands im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, Ungekürzte Volksausgabe (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1911), quote 5–6, see also 533–49. Also relevant in this context is Frevert, *Ehrenmänner*, 220–41, which shows how during the nineteenth century highly educated commoners adopted the

Such bourgeois emphasis on deeds and individual willpower comported with the Kaiser's demands that his officer corps be filled with a "nobility of character," which itself was a phrase designed to bridge the gap between the noble and bourgeois circles whence officers came.³⁴

Professional Self-Concept

What kind of officer was Groener? How did he understand his profession? A parody of staff officers published in a spoof of the *Militär-Wochenblatt* during a General Staff exercise in 1910 captured central components of Groener's antebellum military bearing in ironic, but authentic colors.

See, for example, Major Groener:
What a smart man, and so handsome!
How alive is his spirit,
How full of initiative he is!
Frightful to all his enemies,
He pounces upon them at night,
And before they can think about it,
He has already killed them!
Oh, the grim one knows no mercy.
He slaughters cavalry divisions.³⁵

previously aristocratic practice of dueling and made it their own by infusing it with their cult of *Bildung* and the individual.

34. See Funck, "Bereit zum Krieg?" 82–85.

35. BA-MA, N46/83, fol. 45. The original German: "Seht zum Beispiel Major Groener: / Welch ein Kluger Mann, ein schöner! / Wie ist ihm der Geist so vive, / Wie strotzt er von Initiative! / Schrecklich seinen Feinden allen, / Tut er nachts sie überfallen, / Ehe die sie noch bedacht, / Hat er sie schon umgebracht! / O der Grimme kennt kein Schonen / Schlachtet Reiterdivisionen."

These lines paid homage to General Staff doctrine: wars were won by decisive battles of envelopment, and it was up to able staff officers to create opportunities for these battles and help their commanders win them.³⁶ The various specialized bailiwicks of staff officers—whether history, intelligence, topography, railroads, maneuvers or something else—were subordinated to this central fact. Groener was a General Staff officer first and a railroad specialist second. Above all else, however, these lines highlighted Groener’s military expertise, resoluteness, vigor, zeal, ambition, and optimism. Germany’s military leadership valued these qualities, because it believed the industrialization of warfare had not reduced the importance of the individual; it had made him more important. Modern armaments being comparable among the Great Powers, the quality of officers and soldiers would make the difference in the next war.³⁷

The parody’s tongue-in-cheek bellicosity held no insult for Groener, certainly not among comrades-in-arms. Moreover, if the spoofing junior officers were flattering him, their exaggeration was not great. In a short newspaper article about the airship *Schwaben*, Groener exhibited similar

36. The General Staff’s concept of war is examined in detail in Chapter 3.

37. Groener, “Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens”; Groener, “Schaffung und Heranbildung der Führer” (part IV), *Grenzboten* 70.3.33 (1911): 323; Ute Frevert, “Das Militär als ‘Schule der Männlichkeit’: Erwartungen, Angebote, Erfahrungen im 19. Jahrhundert,” in Frevert, *Militär und Gesellschaft*, 159–60. See also Chapter 3 below.

zeal himself. Admiring the “majestic flight” of this “proud vehicle,” he was even more impressed by “the power of the intellectual forces that [had] won the day over human frailty.” Looking forward to the future of flight, he scolded all doubters and complainers. “What good are wishy-washy views?” The Schwaben bore witness to the power of mind over matter, to the capacity of willpower to overcome all obstacles. “*Ich will*,” it cried to the German people. Clear-sighted, Groener acknowledged that the ship had weaknesses, but he advocated “healthy optimism.” Technology would find solutions. “Considering what has been achieved in the field of flight in barely ten years, it would be downright culpable faintheartedness on our part, if we were not able to configure the Zeppelin invention for practical use in peace and war.”³⁸ This language evinced the manful willpower, energy, and sense of duty that pervaded Groener’s understanding of his profession, and that he believed the officer corps was supposed to instill in Germany’s manhood more generally.

In an article about the army’s role in civilian society, Groener wrote that Germany’s “unparalleled increase in prosperity” rested on its mutually

38. Wilhelm Groener, “Das Luftschiff ‘Schwaben’,” *Schwäbischer Merkur* (11 Aug. 1911), in BA-MA, N46/78, fol. 68. See Guillaume de Syon, *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900–1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Jürgen Eichler, “Die Militärluftschiffahrt in Deutschland 1911–1914 und ihre Rolle in den Kriegsplänen des deutschen Imperialismus (Teil 1),” *Militärgeschichte* 24.4 (1985): 350–60.

dependent, perpetually indivisible “military, political, and economic power.”

Of this triad, however, the army played a unique unifying role in Germany’s development.

The only institution of the state that joins ALL members of the national community [*Volksgenossen*], all occupations and political persuasions [*Parteien*], is the army. Rich and poor, worker and employer, estate owner and small farmer, Social Democrat and Agrarian, anti-Semite and Jew are all together in the ranks, arm in arm in common cause and equal duty for ONE high purpose. The band of camaraderie entwines everyone, unites extremes, fosters appreciation of the duties and requirements of the individual as well as of the occupations (*Berufsstände*) and partisan interests [*Parteien*] in civilian life.³⁹

Far from exhibiting “feudal” sentiments or exclusively monarchical loyalties, Groener’s language recalled the Kaiserreich’s powerful foundational mythology of a nation in arms in 1870–71, when German manhood had fought victoriously against France. It also prefigured the political truce among Germany’s political parties at the beginning of the war in 1914, the *Burgfrieden*.⁴⁰ Groener’s political sentiments comported with Wilhelmine military strictures to be unpolitical. Although he viewed the army’s task as “eminently political,” the army was supposed to remain

39. Groener, “Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens,” original emphasis.

40. Alfred Kelly, “Whose War? Whose Nation? Tensions in the Memory of the Franco-German War of 1870–1871,” in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, ed. Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (New York: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1999), 281–305; Mark R. Stoneman, “The Bavarian Army and French Civilians in the War of 1870–1871: A Cultural Interpretation,” *War in History* 8 (2001), 20–21; Becker, *Bilder von Krieg und Nation*.

aloof from partisanship. “Within the army itself there is no politics, and none is ever permitted.”⁴¹

Like most Wilhelmine officers, however, Groener believed one political ideology was inimical to the nation in arms and, hence, German security: Social Democracy. “Whether one calls it materialism or something else, at its core it is nothing other than a struggle between two worldviews, internationalism and collectivism against the worldview [*Lebens- und Weltanschauung*] that places national duties above the rights of individuals.”⁴² There was nothing unusual about a German officer taking this stance, but when Groener made the same point a year earlier to the officers in his own battalion, he aimed like criticism at the monarchical regime’s supporters.

In this context I cannot refrain from pointing out that Nietzschean philosophy has also exercised a disastrous influence, even in monarchical circles, even among officers. Nietzsche’s philosophy is “me,” then the party, in last place “the fatherland,” whereas for every forward-striving people it must be, “above all else the fatherland.”⁴³

Or as he had written his wife in 1909, “Nietzsche has made those people who have occupied themselves with his philosophy crazy and above all else

41. Groener, “Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens.”

42. Ibid.

43. Groener, “Das Heer und die Sozialdemokratie,” handwritten manuscript, BA-MA, N46/64, fol. 6.

caused much mischief in the officer corps and created a weakly notion of the soldier's vocation. The categorical imperative is better for us."⁴⁴ The logical inconsistency of condemning "collectivist" Social Democracy and Nietzschean philosophy for the same excessive individualism did not disturb Groener, because, in his mind, commitment to defending the German fatherland preceded all other political and philosophical differences. Social Democratic concerns with material welfare and Nietzsche-inspired individualism both undermined the primacy of service to and self-sacrifice for the fatherland. They both placed the individual's welfare above that of the German nation-state.

Groener made his priorities clear when he wrote of the schools' and army's needing to "compensate" for Social Democratic influence by "teaching the people national duty, national citizenship according to monarchical principles."⁴⁵ Monarchy provided Germany's constitutional framework, not its *raison d'être*. Duty to the nation came first. This attitude reflected the officer corps' increasing professional independence from Wilhelm II.⁴⁶ It also laid the foundation for the controversial political stances Groener took vis-

44. Groener to his wife, Helene, Heilbronn, 13 June 1909, BA-MA, N46/D.

45. Groener, "Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens."

46. Wilhelm Deist, *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft: Studien zur preussisch-deutschen Militärgeschichte* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1991), 29, 45; Showalter, "Army, State and Society," 12; Stoneman, "Bürgerliche und adlige Krieger," 48–51.

à-vis Social Democracy and the Prussian monarchy in 1918, when he unexpectedly became an ally of the former and opponent of the latter.

The army, Groener wrote, bore the heaviest responsibility for educating young men in their national duty, because most youth only attended primary school.

Then comes that bad period when the unfermented spirit of youth is especially receptive to the attractive teachings of the Social Democratic worldview. Dissatisfaction, passion, weakness are the characteristic expressions of this fermentation. Most of our recruits enter the army in such a state of mind, after the first seeds of Social Democracy have been placed in their heart, perhaps already sprouted. Whatever the school of the army cannot put right is as a rule forever forfeited to Social Democracy . . .⁴⁷

The Social Democratic menace fed on a deficiency in both intellectual maturity and masculinity among Germany's young men. Hence, crude anti-Social Democratic propaganda would not do, indeed might even be counter-productive. There was a "simpler," if less obvious way to counteract Social Democracy.

This method, whose effect reaches far beyond the army into all sections of the people, is to train the army and therefore the nation [*Volk*] in the military spirit [*kriegerischen Geist*], because this by its very nature is sharply opposed to the worldview of Social Democracy. Inseparably connected with the military genius [*kriegerischen Genius*] is the national, monarchical consciousness [*Sinn*]; out of this [combination] grows a strong, German *Volkstum* that must stand firm in the next domestic or foreign crisis in the development of our people.

47. Groener, "Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens."

Clausewitz teaches us what is meant by military genius . . . From the soil of patriotism [*Vaterlandsliebe*] and willingness to make sacrifices [*Opferfreudigkeit*] will grow traits of character and mind: bravery, determination, presence of mind, steadfastness, strength of character. The moral strength of the worldview that places the fatherland over special interests [*die Partei*] and the materialistic stirrings of the individual will not fail to have an effect on [our] youth.⁴⁸

The army had to give its recruits—Germany’s citizens—a moral education.

On this broad point Groener agreed with the liberal pedagogue and philosopher Theobald Ziegler, who criticized the army for focusing too much on recruits’ occupational training and not enough on their moral development, which, Ziegler believed, mistreatment and the temptations of urban life undermined.⁴⁹ Groener, however, did not criticize the influence of cities on Germany’s soldiers. The salient point for him was that soldiers’ acquisition of vocational skills was inseparable from their moral development as male citizens. Training soldiers for war without giving them a thorough moral education, that is, without making men of them, was unthinkable. Such soldiers would not be up to the foreign and domestic security tasks that they might encounter. Indeed, German manhood, the

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid; Ziegler, *Die geistigen und sozialen Strömungen*, 534–35.

German army, the German nation-state, and Germany's national security were inextricable for Groener.⁵⁰

In another article, he compared soldiers to sailors, in order to explain the extent to which the army required the hearts and minds of its soldiers. "In the land army we do not have war machines that have to be moved, led, and brought into action, but rather people with strong and weak hearts, where psychological imponderables have a completely different meaning than for the individual man on the crew of a warship." A crew at sea is isolated, so "uncompromising compulsion" was probably the best way to maintain discipline. On land, by contrast, infantry and cavalry moved under fire in dispersed formation, so that every soldier had to be "more independent," self-reliant. Hence, the army required "more than discipline." Every soldier had to possess "the will to victory," the will and determination "to move forward." Sailors, on the other hand, could only focus on their specific task, obey their captain's orders, and hope that the ship did not go down.⁵¹

50. See also, Groener, "Das Heer und die Sozialdemokratie," handwritten manuscript, BA-MA, N46/64, fols. 3–7.

51. Groener, "Schaffung und Heranbildung der Führer" (part IV), *Grenzboten* 70.3.33 (1911): 323.

Groener believed that the need for patriotic, strong-willed, self-sacrificing soldiers imposed a “vital and rewarding duty” on officers, especially the young lieutenant. The task “demands a keen sense of the human psyche. Much depends on the officer’s tact.” It was not enough for the officer to bark commands during exercises on the barracks square. He had to focus on being an “*Erzieher* and *Führer*,” a trainer and leader of soldiers.⁵² To officers under his own command, Groener stated, “Authority, that is, the impression that is awoken in the soldier that the officer has a vocation [*berufen ist*] to be a leader and educator by dint of [his] social background, ability, and education, results in subordination, respect, and trust on the soldier’s part.”⁵³ Indeed, “today and in future more than ever, the officer’s career demands personalities, strong characters, ‘proud, weather-proof men in the storm of life’ as the Kaiser” had recently maintained.⁵⁴

How officers led and taught their soldiers mattered. “True authority and humane treatment of the soldier” were “inseparable” to Groener, who was speaking, at least in part, to the recurring public controversy over the

52. Groener, “Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens.” See also the description of his war school commander in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 43–44.

53. Groener, “Das Heer und die Sozialdemokratie,” handwritten manuscript, BA-MA, N46/64, fols. 3, 7.

54. Groener, “Stellung und Bedeutung des Heerwesens.”

abuse of recruits. Officers earned “respect and trust” instead of “fear” by being “strict but just, without prejudice or capriciousness [*Launen*].” Assuming nothing, Groener further told his officers that they had to “fathom cause and effect” in order to be just. They had to recognize “that mental and physical inability as well as malice and obstinacy can be overcome only by awakening and strengthening [the soldiers’] willpower.” Groener believed that recruits responded to reason, empathy, and fair treatment. Even “the smallest progress was worth rewarding.” Moreover, “care for the physical well-being of the soldier and for the small conveniences of life are thankfully answered by the soldier with the desired achievement under great strain.” Most learning took place during the recruit officer’s instruction, which was supposed to occur constantly, not just in the classroom. This instruction was not supposed to be “a lifeless question and answer game, a mindless drill.” Officers needed to do their own intellectual work as well as “become absorbed in the soldier’s world of thought.” “Never be content to establish that something is thus and is not permitted to be otherwise; prove instead that it must be thus because it is impossible for it to be otherwise.” Officers were to teach using nature and history. Consistent with the historicist culture of his time, he argued, “The duties of the soldier and the human being in general are to be explained on

the basis of history.” Instruction had to be given clearly and simply, so that even the least intelligent could understand it. This was “especially difficult,” he wrote. “It is an art and demands constant, intensive work.”⁵⁵

Groener knew that the lieutenant’s task so conceived was a tall order for men who were often not much older than their conscripted charges. Hence, it was understandable for him that some company commanders thought noncommissioned officers long in experience could do a better job. Perhaps they even could if one only had the next inspection in mind. But company commanders needed to rise to the challenging task of teaching new officers how to make soldiers out of recruits. “For our military activity and realistic training for war [*eine wirklich kriegsmässige Ausbildung*], the young, fresh, daring officer with his charismatic [*hinreissend*] influence on the troops can never be replaced by older noncommissioned officers . . .”⁵⁶ Groener thought of soldiers and NCOs as people, not merely material, but he saw a significant qualitative difference between the youngest officers and the most experienced enlisted men. Only the former had the dynamism and character necessary for leading soldiers in war.

55. Groener, “Das Heer und die Sozialdemokratie,” BA-MA, N46/64, fols. 3–7.

56. Wilhelm Groener, “Schaffung und Heranbildung der Führer für den Krieg,” *Die Grenzboten* 70.2–3 (1911): 323.

Groener's concept of officership applied to the army officer corps as a whole. Young officers trained and led soldiers, and senior officers mentored and commanded junior officers. For all that, Groener was no ordinary officer. He was a member of the German army's knowledge, organization, and leadership elite, the Great General Staff. The historiography has paid much attention to the knowledge and organization component of the General Staff's mission, and it has documented the General Staff's interventions in German politics.⁵⁷ Less well understood is the heterogeneity of Wilhelmine military culture and the hegemonic cultural role therein to which the General Staff aspired because of its wartime mission and its officers' selection, training, and careers as the army's preeminent leaders. As a General Staff officer, Groener saw his concept of officership as binding for, but not yet achieved, in the officer corps as a whole. Because the human element would tip the balance in the next war, the General Staff had to influence the very culture of the officer corps, over

57. Walter Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff, 1657–1945*, trans. Brian Battershaw (New York: Praeger, 1953); Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*; Wiegand Schmidt-Richberg, "Die Generalstäbe in Deutschland 1871–1945: Aufgaben in der Armee und Stellung im Staate," *Beiträge zur Militär- und Kriegsgeschichte*, edited by Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamt (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962), 3:11–120; Helmut Otto, *Schlieffen und der Generalstab: Der preussisch-deutsche Generalstab unter der Leitung des Generals von Schlieffen 1891–1905* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1966); Bald, *Der deutsche Generalstab*; Martin Raschke, *Der politisierende Generalstab: Die friederizianischen Kriege in der amtlichen deutschen Militärgeschichtsschreibung, 1890–1914* (Freiburg i. Br.: Rombach, 1993); Arden Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars, 1864–1871* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*.

which, however, it had no direct control in peacetime, when the Ministry of War controlled force structure, the Military Cabinet promotions, the corps commanders training, and all of these entities enjoyed direct access to Wilhelm II. The General Staff could, however, influence the officer corps by attracting the army's most promising young officers to the War Academy, turning the best of those men into General Staff officers, and rotating these officers between line units and staff positions. Such rotations made staff officers more knowledgeable in practical military matters, promoted the identity of staff officers as the army's leaders, helped create valuable human networks, and disseminated General Staff ideas to the army as a whole.⁵⁸ Groener took his vocation to heart. He trained soldiers and officers, and he promoted his ideas in the civilian and military press.

58. The institutional cleavages at the top of the army have been given much attention in connection with the important question of civil-military relations in Imperial Germany. See Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 219–32, 242–45; Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk: Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland*, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1973), 2:148–70; Wiegand Schmidt-Richberg, "Die Regierungszeit Wilhelms II." in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, ed., *Handbuch zur deutschen Militärgeschichte 1648–1939*, 6 vols. (Munich: 1979), 3/V: 61–74; Wilhelm Deist, "Die Armee in Staat und Gesellschaft 1890–1914," in Deist, *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft: Studien zur preußisch-deutschen Militärgeschichte* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991), 19–24; Stig Förster, "The Armed Forces and Military Planning," in Chickering, *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*, 454–88. Robert Foley underlines the significance of Schlieffen's constitutional and institutional position for General Staff war planning in his fine introduction to Robert T. Foley, ed., *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), xviii–xxviii.

Groener's bourgeois cultural orientations belie the feudal interpretation of the officer corps. He was not assimilated to a "noble" ethos when he entered the army. Indeed, the military culture he internalized as an officer comported with the bourgeois culture of his upbringing and education.

But what did his bourgeois cultural credentials mean? Reducing the Wilhelmine officer corps' military culture either to an "anachronistic," "noble" outlook or to a "modern," "bourgeois" ethos constricts and distorts our vision. How did the officer corps view itself and the world around it? How did its beliefs, attitudes, and habits of mind inform its military practices? In other words, what characterized Wilhelmine military culture? The class background of officers was relevant, but its explanatory power is more limited than feudal interpretations of the Wilhelmine officer corps allow.

While Groener's biography by itself is not sufficient to explain Wilhelmine military culture, his successful antebellum career suggests that his military self-concept, beliefs, and attitudes comported with those of his superiors both in the General Staff and the line units in which he served. If

Wilhelmine military culture was not homogeneous, Groener represented an influential coloration of it.

What did officering mean to Groener? First, it represented a profession and career. Besides bringing him social stature and the wherewithal to establish a family, officering, especially his General Staff career, provided him with significant space for personal industry, achievement, and success. At the same time, however, officering was much more than a means to a successful middle-class existence. Although characterized by functional, regimental, regional, and social divisions, the officer corps was united by a common sense of history, duty, loyalty, honor, and comradeship, which Groener also shared.

Within this context, however, Groener saw himself and his General Staff comrades as first among equals, for upon them depended German prospects of victory in the next war. In their eyes, this leadership mission extended well beyond planning mobilization, deployment, and operations. Success in the next war depended on the quality of Germany's individual fighting men, officers and soldiers alike. While the General Staff did not control the army in peacetime, it tried to influence the field army through its publications, exercises, and, not least, the rotation of its officers through line units.

Part II

Officering and Image of War

Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates.

Simone Weil (1940)*

**"The Iliad" or "The Poem of Force,"* quoted in Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 21.

3. Mastering the Future

Groener's military training, work, and self-concept were concrete manifestations of General Staff processes, which had developed over the course of the nineteenth century to cope with the uncertain fortunes of war in a changing military environment. Groener and his fellow General Staff officers possessed the institutionalized expertise and leadership qualities that the General Staff believed were prerequisite to winning wars.¹ Much hinged, however, on what form war took. The army had to be prepared for the next war, not the last war. It had to master the future, whose shape was uncertain. Would the next war comprise mobile operations and decisive battles? Or would it be a long struggle of stalemate and attrition? The General Staff sought to fight the first kind of war, which it was confident of winning, but it ended up in a four-year struggle of attrition, which it lost.

Following Germany's defeat in 1918, Groener became a leading apologist of the so-called Schlieffen Plan, a mobile operational concept that he argued would have brought victory but for the weak leadership of the

1. See Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning* and Martin Samuels, "Directive Command and the German General Staff," *War in History* 2.1 (1995): 22–42.

younger Moltke, Chief of the General Staff from 1906 to 1914.² The unrealized plan that Groener lamented entailed an immediate attack on France with an overwhelming outflanking operation through Belgium. After defeating France, Germany would turn its armies on Russia, which until then it would have held at bay with only a modest force. Groener's postwar attitude towards this plan is puzzling. He was clear-eyed about the four years of operational stalemate and strategic attrition through which he had lived. He understood the manifold linkages between the shooting war and the home front.³ How could he still defend a plan that seemingly ignored the political and material realities of modern warfare?⁴ These questions lead back to Groener's antebellum understanding of war. How did he imagine war before August 1914? Did he expect the kind of war that in his postwar apologia he argued Germany could have fought and won?

This chapter addresses the problem of German war planning and Groener's antebellum image of war in three steps. First, it sketches the military context in which Groener and other General Staff officers planned

2. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*; Groener, *Der Feldherr wider Willen*.

3. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*.

4. Classic expressions of this interpretation of the Schlieffen plan: Gerhard Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan: Kritik eines Mythos* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1956); Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 273–86. More recently: Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Arnold, 1997), 46–52; Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 20–21.

for war. Much of the story is familiar, but it needs telling, because the historiography has begun to move away from previous stances about the antebellum army.⁵ Second, a succession of recent studies has destabilized venerable historiographical views about German war planning.⁶ In fact, the very existence of the Schlieffen Plan has become a matter for debate with implications for our understanding of Groener, whom Terence Zuber now accuses of having “invented” the Schlieffen Plan after the war. This chapter analyzes the prewar aspects of this debate. Third, the chapter analyzes Groener’s antebellum image of war as he revealed it in articles and exercise critiques before the war.

5. Besides challenges to the notion of a “feudal” officer corps (see Chapters 1 and 2 above), I am thinking especially of Antulio J. Echevarria, II, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers before the Great War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), a pathbreaking study on German tactical thought before the Great War.

6. Stig Förster, “Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges 1871–1914: Metakritik eines Mythos,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 54.1 (1995): 61–95; Terence Zuber, “The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered,” *War in History* 6.3 (1999): 262–305; Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Terence M. Holmes, “The Reluctant March on Paris: A Reply to Terence Zuber’s ‘The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered,’” *War in History* 8.2 (2001): 208–32; Zuber, “Terence Holmes Reinvents the Schlieffen Plan,” *War in History* 8.4 (2001): 468–76; Holmes, “The Real Thing: A Reply to Terence Zuber’s ‘Terence Holmes Reinvents the Schlieffen Plan,’” *War in History* 9.1 (2002): 111–20; Zuber, “Terence Holmes Reinvents the Schlieffen Plan—Again,” *War in History* 10.1 (2003): 92–101; Robert T. Foley, “The Origins of the Schlieffen Plan,” *War in History* 10.2 (2003): 222–32; Holmes, “Asking Schlieffen: A Further Reply to Terence Zuber,” *War in History* 10.4 (2003): 464–79; Zuber, “The Schlieffen Plan was an Orphan,” *War in History* 11.2 (2004): 222–25; Foley, “The Real Schlieffen Plan,” *War in History* 13.1 (2006): 91–115.

Military Context

Universal male conscription formed the foundation of Germany's military power. With some variations in mandatory length of service during the life of the Kaiserreich, the ranks of the Imperial German army were filled with literate and numerate conscripts who began a two-year period of active duty at twenty. These men then passed into the reserves until they were twenty-eight. Afterwards they passed through two levies of the territorial militia. They had no further service obligation after forty-five.⁷ The German army was organized mainly in regionally based corps, twenty by 1890 and twenty-five prior to the war in 1914. Each corps was an independent fighting unit of over 40,000 men by 1914, including infantry, artillery, and cavalry, as well as administrative structures to obtain supplies and troop replacements.⁸ This system in combination with Germany's extensive railroad network enabled the army to mobilize and deploy massive numbers of trained soldiers for war in a relatively short period of time.⁹

7. Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Handbuch*, 3/V:49–52; Frobenius, *Militär-Lexikon*, s.v. "Dienstpflicht."

8. Showalter, *Tannenberg*, 117–18; Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Handbuch*, 3/V:55–57; Frobenius, *Militär-Lexikon*, s.v. "Armeeekorps."

9. Dennis E. Showalter, *Railroads and Rifles: Soldiers, Technology, and the Unification of Germany* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1975); Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 75–141. On the military use of railroads: Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*; David Stevenson, "War by Timetable? The Railway Race before 1914," *Past & Present* 162 (1999); Allan Mitchell, *The Great Train Race: Railways and the Franco-German Rivalry, 1815–*

The Prussian-led German states had leveraged this system into a victory over France's smaller long-service army in 1870.¹⁰ During the next four decades, however, Germany surrendered its numerical advantage. While its population was larger and growing faster than France's, the latter not only adopted universal conscription, but also conscripted a larger percentage of its eligible men. More importantly, France and Russia concluded an alliance in 1892, which meant that Germany's next European war would likely be on two fronts with Germany outnumbered. By 1910, for example, the General Staff estimated that the Kaiserreich could mobilize twenty-five corps and its only certain ally, Austria-Hungary, fifteen. By contrast, France could mobilize twenty-one corps and Russia thirty-one.¹¹

1914 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Edwin A. Pratt, *The Rise of Rail Power in War and Conquest, 1833–1914* (Orchard House, Westminster: P. S. King and Son, 1915); Adolf Sarter, *Die deutschen Eisenbahnen im Kriege* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1930); John Westwood, *Railways at War* (San Diego: Howell-North Books, 1980).

10. Heinz Helmert and Hans-Jürgen Usczeck, *Preussischdeutsche Kriege von 1864 bis 1871: Militärischer Verlauf* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1967); Richard Holmes, *The Road to Sedan: The French Army 1866–70* (New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc, 1984); Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German invasion of France, 1870–1871* (New York: Macmillan, 1961); Dennis E. Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

11. Demographic trends in Europe: B. R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Europe: 1750–1988*, 3rd ed. (New York: Stockton Press, 1992), 1–138. Conscription in Europe: Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Handbuch*, 3/V:41–52. Size of armies: Rüdiger von Collenberg, *Die deutsche Armee*, passim, for 1910: 76. Politics of the Imperial German army's size: Stig Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus: Die deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik zwischen Status-quo-Sicherung und Aggression 1890–1913* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985); Michael Geyer, *Deutsche Rüstungspolitik 1860–1980* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), 45–96.

Numbers were only part of the story. Quality mattered too. A smaller number of trained, disciplined, and well-led soldiers could beat an inexperienced armed horde, if with difficulty, as the German campaign against hastily raised Republican forces on the Loire in 1870–71 had shown. And the German armies' earlier defeat of the Second Empire's land forces in 1870 had been due in no small part to their better organization, discipline, and leadership.¹²

The Imperial German army could no longer take this qualitative edge for granted, however. Its success in 1870–71 had made it an object of close scrutiny across Europe. Moreover, military technologies were undergoing rapid transformation. Symptomatic was the sentiment Herman Frobenius expressed in his 1901 *Militär-Lexikon*: "In order not to be out of date already before its publication, this encyclopedia had to be prepared with the utmost speed."¹³ While planning for war was inherently fraught with uncertainty in peacetime, the pace of technological change during this period made such planning even less calculable. The last decades before the Great War saw dramatic increases in the range, accuracy, and rate of fire of

12. Helmert and Uszeck, *Preussischdeutsche Kriege*; Holmes, *Road to Sedan*; Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*; Showalter, *Wars of German Unification*; Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*; Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *1870: La France dans la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1989).

13. Frobenius, *Militär-Lexikon*, preface.

infantry weapons, which now included magazine-fed rifles and machine guns. These technical advances made the deadly zone many times deeper and far more lethal, thereby rendering the infantry attack even more difficult than the introduction of breach-loading infantry weapons had made it during the American Civil War and German Wars of Unification.

Furthermore, the invention of smokeless powder enabled defenders to fire their weapons without giving away their positions. Artillery firepower multiplied too. Guns could engage the enemy at increasing distances with indirect fire, and built-in recoil mechanisms permitted them to deliver accurate fire far more rapidly, because they no longer had to be sited after each round they fired.¹⁴

These developments led to a tactical crisis with both physical and psychological dimensions. Military leaders had to consider not only the effect of the enemy's fire on men's bodies, but also its "moral" impact. The vast increases in the volume of infantry and artillery fire meant that troops

14. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, esp. 13–31, 65–93. See also Dieter Storz, *Kriegsbild und Rüstung vor 1914: Europäische Landstreitkräfte vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Herford: E. S. Mittler, 1992); Storz, "Die Schlacht der Zukunft: Die Vorbereitungen der Armeen Deutschlands und Frankreichs auf den Landkrieg des 20. Jahrhunderts," in *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung—Wahrnehmung—Analyse*, ed. Wolfgang Michalka (N.p.: Seehapper, 1997); Storz, "Die Auswirkungen der wirtschaftlichen und technischen Entwicklungen auf die Vorstellungen der europäischen Militärs von einem zukünftigen Krieg zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts," in *Führungsdenken in europäischen und nordamerikanischen Streitkräften im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Gerhard P. Gross (Bonn: E. S. Mittler, 2001).

could reach their breaking point much more quickly. How long soldiers could hold up under such strain was a matter of grave concern, to which angst about civilized man's supposedly waning vitality contributed. How could infantry attacks succeed in such an environment?¹⁵

The ensuing tactical crisis had broad operational implications.

German military leaders understood war in terms of mobile operations that culminated in decisive battles.¹⁶ Königgrätz (Sadowa) in 1866 and Sedan in 1870 were the most famous examples, although Wilhelmine officers understood that such results would be much more difficult to attain in the future.¹⁷ Modern firepower militated against mobility. It forced soldiers to

15. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, esp. 13–31; Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 191–96.

16. The literature on this subject is vast. Recent studies and source collections with varying methodological approaches and source bases include Arden Bucholz, *Hans Delbrück and the German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985); Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 314–81; Robert M. Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899–1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Robert T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870–1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Hull, *Absolute Destruction*; Stig Förster, ed., *Moltke: Vom Kabinettskrieg zum Volkskrieg* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1992); Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993); Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*.

17. The examples of 1866 and 1870–71: Gordon A. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz: Prussia's Victory over Austria, 1866* (1964; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*; Helmert and Usczeck, *Preussischdeutsche Kriege*; Showalter, *Railroads and Rifles*; Showalter, *Wars of German Unification*; Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871*. European war experiences in the intervening years

dig in, and it cost unprecedented amounts of blood to eject soldiers from fortified positions. Trenches and inconclusive battles in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) prefigured the Great War’s stalemate on the Western Front.¹⁸

Modern firepower also increased logistical problems to the point where they became operationally relevant.¹⁹ Consider, for instance, the contrast between the German army’s consumption of artillery ammunition during the Franco-Prussian War and that of the Japanese army three and a half decades later in the Russo-Japanese War. Each German artillery piece fired 199 rounds on average during the whole war in 1870–71.²⁰ By contrast, the Japanese expended an average of 174.5 rounds per gun in a single day at Nanshan. Since the Japanese began this battle with only 198 rounds available for each gun, they could not immediately pursue the tactically defeated Russian army, which withdrew in good order. And whereas the German infantry had been able to carry sufficient ammunition in 1870–71, the Japanese infantry was hampered by shortages of ammunition.²¹ The growing size of armies promised to make logistical problems even worse in a

before the Great War: Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory*; Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*.

18. Citino, *German Way of War*, 191–96; Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*; Richard Connaughton, *Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: Russia’s War with Japan*, rev. ed. (London: Cassell, 2003).

19. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 154; Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory*.

20. Crevelld, *Supplying War*, 102–4.

21. Connaughton, *Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear*, 101.

European war. Leaving aside the broad problem of industrial capacity, which the military did not consider, armies needed ever larger stocks of artillery ammunition.²² The Russian army expended an astonishing average of 87,000 rounds per month during the Russo-Japanese War. In the First Balkan War (1912), the Bulgarian army nearly tripled this rate to 254,000 rounds per month, an amount soon dwarfed in the First World War.²³

More immediately relevant for offensive mobile operations was the problem of getting ammunition to the troops in the field. Railroads could handle that task in defensive operations, but in offensive operations rails usually had to be repaired. And ammunition had to be brought from the railheads to the troops the old-fashioned way, by horse and wagon.²⁴ Motor vehicles appeared around the turn of the century, but their utility and availability for large-scale operations was still limited, to say nothing of their cost. They were not yet built on moving assembly lines. Trucks were not manufactured in quantity until the war itself, although the military

22. The antebellum German discussion about economic preparations for war: Lothar Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge: Deutschlands wirtschaftliche Rüstungsbestrebungen vor 1914* (Boppard a.R.: Boldt, 1968).

23. Citino, *German Way of War*, 192.

24. Crevelld, *Supplying War*, 89–113.

introduced a subsidy in 1908. There were 9,639 registered trucks in Germany by 1914, which was no basis for abandoning the horse.²⁵

The irony of modern firepower was that it threatened to bring war to a standstill, to make it a matter not of operational art, but attrition. And a war of attrition on two fronts was a war that Germany could lose, outnumbered as it was, and dependent on foreign imports for both food and its armaments industry.²⁶

Finally, armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands and spread over hundreds of miles presented unprecedented challenges of command and control, even with the telegraph, telephone, and nascent radio, as well as reconnaissance airships and airplanes. Technology enabled firm control over the initial mobilization and deployment process, but the frictions of war made themselves felt soon thereafter.²⁷

25. James M. Laux, *The European Automobile Industry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 35–45; Reiner Flik, *Von Ford lernen? Automobilbau und Motorisierung in Deutschland bis 1933* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 105–25. See also Rudi Volti, *Cars and Culture: The Life Story of a Technology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 21–42. The problem of transporting sufficient numbers of horses upon mobilization: Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*, 162–63.

26. Germany's dependence on international trade: Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge*, 155–76.

27. Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory*; Robert T. Foley, "Preparing the German Army for the First World War: The Operational Ideas of Alfred von Schlieffen and Helmuth von Moltke the Younger," *War & Society* 22.2 (2004): 17.

Could a war of movement still be fought? Ivan Bloch, Polish banker, military pundit, and pacifist argued in 1899 that war among the great powers had become impossible. Modern arms and ammunition had made offensive maneuver unsustainable. The only way a modern infantry victory was still possible, he reasoned, was if one side outnumbered the other by at least eight to one and attacked not frontally but in the flank. Strategic outflanking maneuvers would not succeed, however, because the enemy could use his railroads to respond in a timely manner to any new offensive. Hence, war in the future would lead to stalemate. Furthermore, he believed, modern man did not possess sufficient mettle to survive the privations of protracted warfare. And an extended struggle of attrition would break the interdependent financial systems of the belligerent countries, which would lead to revolution.²⁸

While Bloch underestimated man's capacity to thrive in the midst of mass death and destruction, his prescient image serves to heighten the

28. Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World without War: The Peace Movement and German Society, 1892–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 97–99; Gat, *History of Military Thought*, 377–80; Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 85–91; Paolo G. Motta, "Economy and Conduct of War: The Theory of Ivan S. Bloch," *History of Economic Ideas* 3.3 (1995): 65–91; Michael Welch, "The Centenary of the British Publication of Jean de Bloch's *Is War Now Impossible?* (1899–1999)," *War in History* 7.3 (2000): 273–94; Grant Dawson, "Preventing 'A Great Moral Evil': Jean de Bloch's 'The Future of War' as Anti-Revolutionary Pacificism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37.1 (2002): 5–19; Michael Howard, "Men against Fire: Expectations of War in 1914," *International Security* 9.1 (1984): 41–57.

apparent senselessness of the First World War. How could the generals not have known what was going to happen? Did they not willfully shut their eyes in the face of change? Did they not prepare to fight wars of yore, about which they had learned the wrong lessons?²⁹ Tempting though such arguments are, they suffer from presentism and technological determinism. It is not helpful to divide officers into a dichotomy of “traditionalists” who rejected new technologies outright and “progressives” who embraced them as ipso facto improvements. Turning one’s back on change was not an option for officers, but neither was embracing it blindly. Change was a given. So, in their minds, was the occurrence of war. The burning question was how change would affect the prosecution of the next war.³⁰

Military answers to the problem centered on tactics. Military authors appreciated the physical and psychological effects of modern weaponry, and

29. These questions inform the following studies, for example: John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon, 1975); Schulte, *Die deutsche Armee*; Brose, *Kaiser’s Army*.

30. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 3–5. On technological determinism see also George Raudzens, “War-Winning Weapons: The Measurement of Technological Determinism in Military History,” *The Journal of Military History* 54.4 (1990): 403–34; Gervase Phillips, “The Obsolescence of the *Arme Blanche* and Technological Determinism in British Military History,” *War in History* 9.1 (2002): 39–59; Stefan Kaufmann, “Technisiertes Militär: Methodische Überlegungen zu einem symbiotischen Verhältnis,” in *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*, ed. Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), 195–209. Cf. Steven D. Jackman, “Shoulder to Shoulder: Close Control and ‘Old Prussian Drill’ in German Offensive Infantry Tactics, 1871–1914,” *The Journal of Military History* 68.1 (2004): 73–104, which divides Germany’s tacticians into “conservatives” and “progressives” and argues that the former maintained the upper hand.

they produced, as Antulio Echevarria and Robert Citino have recently shown, a vast body of well-reasoned, mostly realistic responses to the tactical crisis.³¹ Echevarria writes,

By 1914, the infantry crisis was sufficiently resolved to permit men to cross the deadly zone. The German 43d Infantry Brigade's attack against Russian forces near the town of Gerdauen on September 9, 1914, for example, provided ample proof that assaults carried out in open order and in accordance with the principle of synchronized fire and movement could succeed even in the face of modern firepower. The German commander used what little artillery he had to suppress the Russian guns while his infantry, supported by the regiment's machine guns, deployed into open order (six to twelve meters between soldiers) and advanced in short bounds. As a result, the Germans suffered less than 2 percent casualties, despite the fact that the attack took place over ground virtually devoid of cover.

The same tactical principles (but greater firepower and casualty figures) obtained on the Western Front during the initial mobile phase of the war. Dissemination of these principles, however, was uneven before the German army went to war in 1914. One company in the above-mentioned attack was commanded by a reserve officer, who had his soldiers advance in close order, at a cost of over 50% casualties. Nor were such egregious mistakes limited to reservists.³²

31. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*; Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory*, 31–141. These historians flesh out an image of the army to which Dennis Showalter has long subscribed. See, for example, Showalter, *Tannenberg*.

32. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 214 and 280, n.1. This example is also an illustration of the double-edged sword of the German army's decentralized system of command (usually called *Auftragstaktik*), which will be discussed below.

The challenge for German war planners entailed more than tactics, however. Effectiveness on the battlefield mattered, but it did not ultimately decide either the First or the Second World Wars. In each the German army outfought its enemies man for man, but ultimately lost.³³ In fact, some Wilhelmine military thinkers had considered the possibility of a war of attrition, but most rejected it as a strategy for Germany out of hand.³⁴ Given Germany's vulnerability to a blockade, rejecting attrition as a desirable strategy made sense. More difficult to explain, however, is why the German army thought it could rely on military operations to prevent France, Russia, and probably Britain from imposing a war of attrition on Germany. After all, beating France by itself in 1870–71 had been complicated by significant non-operational factors. Germany defeated France's standing armies in a month, but the war lasted almost five more months, because the new Republican regime kept raising and sending new armies into battle. French leaders even contemplated widespread guerrilla warfare as part of a *guerre à outrance*. Nonetheless, subsequent German General Staff histories

33. The superior fighting capability of the German army: Dupuy, *Genius for War*; Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training, and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888–1918* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1995), 2. See also Millett et al., "Effectiveness of Military Organizations."

34. Foley, *German Strategy*, 14–81; Bucholz, *Hans Delbrück*.

focused on the war's military operations, for these, in their opinion, were the essence of war.³⁵

The high degree of professionalization in the Wilhelmine officer corps, especially the General Staff, fostered this vision of war. Officers internalized it in their training, and their further advancement depended on their ability to function effectively within the paradigm.³⁶ All of the General Staff's sections—including topography, military history, military intelligence, railroads, operations, and maneuvers—followed integrated routines to prepare the army for one overriding goal: to destroy the enemies' armies in battle and thereby win wars.³⁷

The General Staff's institutional position within the army and state reinforced this narrow understanding of war among the General Staff's leadership.³⁸ The army was kept largely outside the reach of civilian government, in order to maintain the Prussian king's personal rule, his *Kommandogewalt*. Some parliamentary oversight was unavoidable,

35. This tension between the experience and the interpretation of the 1870–71 war is a major theme in Förster, *Moltke*. On the German understanding of war's essence, see Gat, *History of Military Thought*, 314–81.

36. Stoneman, "Bürgerliche und adlige Krieger," 37–47; Dennis E. Showalter, "From Deterrence to Doomsday Machine: The German Way of War, 1890–1914," *The Journal of Military History* 64.3 (2000), here 690–91.

37. Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*.

38. Foley, "Introduction," Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, xix–xxvii. Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 107–8; Showalter, "From Deterrence to Doomsday Machine," 692.

however, because the Reichstag had the power of the purse. Bismarck limited this influence by submitting long-term military bills that removed defense spending from the day-to-day business of the Reichstag. Initially defense budgets were passed for seven years, whereas members of the Reichstag were only elected to three-year terms; however, the monarchy was forced to give a little ground in 1893, after which the tenures of Reichstag members and military budgets were both five years. The Hohenzollern monarchy limited parliamentary influence over the military still further by clipping the wings of the Prussian War Minister, who was the only military official answerable to the Reichstag. The War Ministry was limited to “administrative matters,” whereas “command matters” were decided by officers in a variety of different positions with direct access to the Kaiser, more than forty in all under Wilhelm II, who in this fashion also sought to shield his personal rule from the ambitions of any single officer or military institution. Besides the war minister, the most important positions with direct access to the monarch were the chief of the Military Cabinet (responsible for personnel matters in the officer corps), the corps commanders (who had wide latitude in how they trained their soldiers for war), and the chief of the General Staff, who only assumed command of the army when war broke out. Schlieffen’s predecessor in this position, the

ambitious Alfred von Waldersee (1888–91), sought to expand his influence beyond the General Staff and even the army, but his machinations led to his dismissal.³⁹ Schlieffen focused on finding operational solutions to the country's worsening strategic situation, and he honed the operational skills of the staff officers under their command. Moltke continued in this vein.⁴⁰ Although he also gave some thought to supply for the whole country, General Staff participation in interagency discussions never went beyond an advisory role.⁴¹

The deleterious polycratic structure of the army did nothing to detract from its public image, however. The army was not simply charged with maintaining Germany's national security. It was also a central vehicle for national integration. It embodied German virtue. And it guaranteed a position of greatness for Germany. Isabel Hull writes, "The military was, thus, an overfreighted symbol. And it was impossible to separate the symbol from the real institution and its actions."⁴² The most significant consequence

39. Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14–41; Deist, "Die Armee in Staat und Gesellschaft," 19–24; Wiegand Schmidt-Richberg, "Die Regierungszeit Wilhelms II." in *Militär-geschichtliches Forschungsamt, Handbuch*, 3/V: 61–74; Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 219–32, 242–45; Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk*, 2:148–70.

40. Foley, "Introduction," Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, xix–xxvii; Foley, "Preparing the German Army."

41. Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge*.

42. Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 108. See Chapter 3 above for Groener's similar understanding of the army's role in the nation.

of this “symbolic overload,” according to Hull, “was the imperative to succeed. . . . The public expected it always and under every circumstance to acquit itself successfully. . . . It was unthinkable that Germany’s premier institution should fail.”⁴³ How, under these circumstances, could the General Staff recognize, let alone admit, that it could not by itself overcome the severe restraints that Germany’s domestic political arrangements and diplomatic bungling had placed on it? There was never any question of the General Staff chief advising the Kaiser and the imperial chancellor to show more restraint in their foreign policy. Indeed, the pressure to succeed sometimes led the General Staff chief to advocate “preventive war,” that is, an attack on its presumed enemies before they grew too strong.⁴⁴

The Schlieffen Plan Debate

During the life of the Kaiserreich, each chief of the General Staff faced the dilemma of how to achieve a clear operational victory in the next war, which would likely be on two fronts against superior numbers and would occur in an uncompromising tactical environment. The chiefs’ ideas and solutions

43. Ibid, 108–9; Dennis E. Showalter, “German Grand Strategy: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Militargeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 48.2 (1990), here 79–80.

44. Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 255–98; Michael Schmid, *Der “Eiserne Kanzler” und die Generäle: Deutsche Rüstungspolitik in der Ära Bismarck (1871–1890)* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 273–516.

varied over time as they adapted to changes in Germany's strategic situation, including in its diplomatic relations as well as in the disposition of its army, fortifications, and railroad infrastructure relative to those of its presumed enemies.⁴⁵ The most provocative document to arise from this process and survive the bombs of the Second World War was a memorandum that the newly retired Schlieffen wrote in the winter of 1906 for his successor, the younger Moltke, and backdated to December 1905, the last month of his tenure. This notorious document, the so-called Schlieffen Plan, has achieved canonical status in the historiography. Not only did it express the core operational ideas behind Germany's invasion of Belgium and France in 1914, but it also was written by a man who most General Staff officers openly venerated after 1918.⁴⁶ Recently, however, long-held assumptions about the Schlieffen Plan's meaning and significance have come under fire. Groener even stands accused of "inventing the Schlieffen Plan" after 1918.⁴⁷ This allegation will be addressed in a later chapter. The

45. Ferdinand von Schmerfeld, ed., *Die deutschen Aufmarschpläne, 1871–1890* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1929); Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*; Terence Zuber, ed., *German War Planning, 1891–1914: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2004); Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*; Holmes, "Reluctant March"; Foley, "Origins"; Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan."

46. The memorandum is reprinted in Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, whose analysis is still fundamental to this topic, and Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, 163–74. See also Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk*, II: 239–55.

47. The phrase is from the title of Terence Zuber's 2002 book. See also Zuber, "Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," 300.

present section analyzes that part of the contentious Schlieffen Plan debate that focuses on the prewar evidence. It examines recent findings on Schlieffen, Moltke, and German war planning that bear on Groener's antebellum image of war, his experience of the war, and his postwar interpretation of it.

Let us begin with the conventional assessment of the Schlieffen Plan.⁴⁸ According to long-standing consensus, Schlieffen proposed to deploy most of the German army against France, marching the lion's share of those troops through Belgium and the Netherlands first, in order to outflank France's substantial fortifications on her border with Germany. German forces would then invade France across its northern border and envelop the French army, the bulk of which France would initially deploy on its eastern border, either in defensive positions or for an attack on Germany through Alsace and Lorraine. The French were to be defeated as rapidly as possible

48. Besides Ritter, the following account draws on Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 273–95; Martin Kitchen, *A Military History of Germany from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 171–75; Crevel, *Supplying War*, 113–18; Crevel, *Command in War*, 148–52; Jehuda Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 44–60; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 107–56; Gunther E. Rothenberg, “Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 311–20; Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*, 158–213; Herwig, *First World War*, 43–62; Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 17–23; Gat, *History of Military Thought*, 363–70.

(in six weeks by many accounts), after which Germany would redeploy its forces to the east against Russia, which presented a less immediate danger to Germany, but which could not be as rapidly defeated, because of the vast and inaccessible spaces into which its forces could withdraw.

Schlieffen's ambitious plan was problematic from a strategic perspective, because the violation of Belgian and Dutch neutrality would bring not only these two small countries into the war, but also in all likelihood Great Britain, which was a guarantor of Belgian neutrality. Moreover, Schlieffen's plan required the German army to go on the offensive as soon as hostilities began, because the passage of time would work against it. The moment France or Russia ordered mobilization, Germany would do the same, but would not stop there. One country's mobilization would automatically trigger the German war machine against both France and Russia. The dictates of German military planning would supplant any further diplomacy, as Germany mobilized, deployed, and invaded its western neighbors in a preset sequence. Schlieffen's plan made it more likely that international tensions would lead to war, that Germany would appear the aggressor, and that Britain, an empire with global reach and unmatched naval strength, would number among Germany's enemies.

Schlieffen's plan was also problematic from a narrower military perspective. It relied on notational units that did not exist in the army's order of battle, and it seemed to rest on shaky operational and tactical ground. A recent survey of Germany's Great War sums up the damning historiographical consensus:

The plan was a tribute not only to Schlieffen's fantasy, but also to his passion for detail. It represented the apotheosis of the idea that planning reigned supreme in modern war. It scripted the entire campaign. It prescribed the movements down to the level of individual corps during the projected 42 days of the apocalypse. But in its sovereign inflexibility, its disregard for what the great military philosopher Karl von Clausewitz had called the "frictions" of warfare, and in its inattention to the manpower and logistical requirements of the massive armies on which it imposed such titanic expectations, Schlieffen's plan defied a lot of professional wisdom and created perplexing problems for the man who succeeded him in 1906.⁴⁹

According to the same book, Schlieffen and other military planners pursued such apparent folly, because they

remained wedded to the idea that the dynamics of combat had not changed since 1870, that the first encounters between armies would prove decisive in any future campaign, and that victory therefore awaited the side that best organized its forces for rapid mobilization and initial deployment. These calculations put a premium on the management and planning of military forces, for they suggested that the issue in any future struggle would be all but settled before the first shots were exchanged.⁵⁰

49. Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 21.

50. Ibid, 18.

Another recent survey of the Great War agrees and concludes, “The Schlieffen Plan was a high-risk operation born of hubris and bordering on recklessness. One throw of the dice would determine the nation’s future.”⁵¹ What had become of the successful elder Moltke’s dictum that an operational plan never survived the first battle, that strategy was nothing but a system of expedients?

And given the plan’s fundamental weaknesses, why did Schlieffen’s successor, the younger Moltke, use a variation of it in 1914? This question has become even more difficult to answer in light of Stig Förster’s argument that Moltke and other General Staff officers knew that the next war would not be short.⁵² Besides citing the familiar testimony of Ivan Bloch, the aged elder Moltke’s 1890 speech prophesying a thirty year’s war, Friedrich Engels’ similar prophecy in 1887, and Colmar von der Goltz’s insistence that Europe had entered an “age of people’s war,” Förster calls attention to concerns arising from the General Staff’s regular workflow. Generalmajor

51. Herwig, *First World War*, 47.

52. Förster, “Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges”; Förster, “Im Reich des Absurden: Die Ursachen des Ersten Weltkrieges,” in *Wie Kriege entstehen: Zum historischen Hintergrund von Staatenkonflikten*, ed. Bernd Wegner (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), 211–52; Holger H. Herwig, “Germany and the ‘Short-War’ Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?” *Journal of Military History* 66.3 (2002): 681–93; Terence M. Holmes, “‘One Throw of the Gambler’s Dice’: A Comment on Holger Herwig’s View of the Schlieffen Plan,” *Journal of Military History* 67 (2003): 513–16.

Köpke, an Oberquartiermeister in the General Staff, wrote a sobering report for Schlieffen in 1895 on Germany's chances in an offensive war against France. He concluded,

In any case, there are indications that the war of the future will have a different appearance than that of 1870–71. We have no reason to expect quick, decisive victories. The army and the people must accustom themselves to this unpleasant prospect well in advance, if an ominous pessimism is not to spread at the very beginning of the war and become a serious danger for its favorable conclusion. We must be able to successfully conduct large-scale trench warfare, the battle over long fronts reinforced with field fortifications, and the siege of great fortresses. Otherwise we will not be able to attain success against the French. Hopefully we will not lack the necessary intellectual and material preparation for this and at the decisive moment we will be thoroughly practiced and well equipped for this form of warfare.⁵³

Schlieffen recognized the potential for modern war to stagnate into never-ending positional warfare, but accepting this danger as a foregone conclusion was out of the question. “The French army must be destroyed,” he wrote in his famous December 1905 memorandum. A way out had to be found, or else Germany risked economic and social collapse in the face of a drawn-out peoples’ war. Schlieffen’s plan for a massive outflanking

53. Quoted in Förster, “Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges,” 75; translation from Zuber, *German War Planning*, 70–71. This quote comes from an unpublished study written by Wilhelm Dieckmann in the late 1930s, because Köpke’s original study did not survive the Second World War. Förster fails to point out that Dieckmann placed this quote in the context of a discussion about Germany’s chances for success with a direct attack on France’s well fortified borders; however, his estimation of the quote’s significance appears justified, insofar as Köpke’s language made no such qualifications in this expansive concluding paragraph.

maneuver seemed to him to offer such a path, if he had enough soldiers.⁵⁴ Schlieffen's successor, however, was less optimistic. By 1913 the younger Moltke had rejected Schlieffen's proposal to violate Dutch neutrality, because Germany needed the Netherlands for trade, a concern that would have been irrelevant in a short war.⁵⁵ Indeed, Förster points to a long-overlooked study by Lothar Burchardt that demonstrates some General Staff participation in discussions with civilian authorities about the likely economic consequences of the next war and what preparations might be undertaken. Significantly, this dialog occurred under the younger Moltke, not Schlieffen. Förster also offers telling pessimistic quotes from Moltke, who he concludes expected a longer war of some eighteen to twenty-four months.⁵⁶

When Förster first presented this argument in 1995, the centrality of Moltke's testimony seemed to be a weak link in his chain of evidence, as it had for Burchardt before him. Moltke, after all, has since the operational disaster on the Marne in 1914 suffered from an image as weak and psychologically unstable.⁵⁷ Anticipating this criticism, Förster points out

54. Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges," 76–80, quote 77.

55. Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, 71–72, n. 50.

56. Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges"; Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge*.

57. The problem of Moltke's inaccurate historiographical image: Annika Mombauer,

that in peacetime Moltke was a more effective leader than the historiography gives him credit for, insofar as it was he, not Schlieffen, who put a stop to the Kaiser's detrimental influence on the army's annual maneuvers.⁵⁸ Burchardt points to some apparent uncertainty on Moltke's part about the probable length of a war, but he also suggests good reasons Moltke had for making seemingly contradictory statements. When Moltke wanted to improve Germany's military preparedness, he found it best to point to how long the next war could be. If, on the other hand, he wanted to use reserve formations in his initial offensive (an idea that went back to Schlieffen), it was better to point out that the next war could be a short one. Germany should throw everything at once against its enemies and bring the matter to a conclusion as quickly as possible. Finally, if he wanted war before Germany's strategic situation grew even worse, it made sense for him to express optimism to Imperial Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, whom Moltke considered too cautious. Moreover, according to Burchardt, Moltke needed to justify to Bethmann the efficacy of General Staff plans to violate Belgian neutrality.⁵⁹

"A Reluctant Military Leader? Helmuth von Moltke and the July Crisis of 1914," *War in History* 6.4 (1999), 418.

58. Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges," 83. See also Foley, "Preparing the German Army," 6–7.

59. Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge*, 25–26, quote 25.

A recent study by Annika Mombauer demonstrates that Moltke was by no means passive or merely reactive in the events that led to Germany's decision for war in 1914. He deliberately and effectively helped move the Imperial German leadership to a decision for war. His subsequent reputation as weak and unbalanced stemmed from his performance in the war's opening months, as well as from the war's final outcome and the postwar activities of legions of detractors, against whom he could not defend himself, since he had already died.⁶⁰ Another recent study undermines attempts to use his wife's theosophical beliefs to malign him.⁶¹ None of this scholarship turns Moltke into a likable figure, but it suggests that the historiography must take him seriously.

While this shift in Moltke's historiographical image lends credence to Förster's argument about the General Staff's expectation of a longer war, it casts doubt on his ultimate conclusion that Moltke knowingly led the army towards its own destruction as "possibly a kind of suicide from fear of death"

60. Mombauer, "Reluctant Military Leader?"; Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*. Foley now paints Moltke's wartime operational leadership in similar colors in "Preparing the German Army." A fruitful synergy has arisen from the friendship of Foley and Mombauer, each of whom has studied the younger Moltke in the archives, Foley from the point of view of German operational thought and war planning and Mombauer from the perspective of high politics and the origins of the Great War. Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 91–105; Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, viii–ix; Foley, *German Strategy*, viii.

61. Helmut Zander, "Der Generalstabschef Helmuth von Moltke d.J. und das theosophische Milieu um Rudolf Steiner," *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 62.2 (2003): 423–58.

in August 1914.⁶² Perhaps Moltke's war plan—and Schlieffen's December 1905 memorandum—possessed a rationality after all.

Like Förster and the myriad of Schlieffen's detractors before him, Terence Zuber considers the Schlieffen Plan to have been unworkable. Since, however, he assumes that Schlieffen was both rational and professionally competent, he argues that Schlieffen must have had ulterior motives for writing his December 1905 memorandum. Indeed, Zuber maintains that the memorandum was not a war plan at all, but rather an elaborate effort to prove Germany's need for more troops.⁶³ While it is clear that Schlieffen was concerned about the numbers during his tenure as General Staff chief, Zuber never explains why Schlieffen would even have felt the need to contrive such an elaborate case for more troops for Moltke's benefit, when the General Staff consistently advocated a bigger army anyway, yet had no control over its size. If Schlieffen had written his complex plan solely in order to influence Germany's force structure, he would have had to address it to the war ministry, which itself had no part in the General Staff war planning process and was not privy to its secrets.

62. Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges," 95.

63. Zuber, "Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered"; Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*. Förster also sees the December 1905 memorandum as a program for more troops, but he does not claim that changing the army's force structure was the sole purpose of Schlieffen's plan; Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus*, 158–65.

Zuber also fails to analyze the December 1905 memorandum itself in any meaningful detail.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, his effort to reinterpret the Schlieffen Plan has commanded serious historiographical attention, not simply because of his bold conclusions, but also because he is the first scholar to bring much previously unknown war planning material into the discussion.⁶⁵

Zuber analyzes sources that only became available to the public with the end of the Cold War.⁶⁶ The most important of these is an uncompleted, unpublished study on the evolution of Schlieffen's thought from 1891 to 1905 written in the 1930s by Major Dr. Wilhelm Dieckmann of the Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, the successor to the

64. He does, however, critically reexamine the maps that Ritter found and published with the December memorandum. Zuber, "Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," 297–99; Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, 214–17.

65. Besides filling many pages of *War in History* since 1999, the debate has now spilled over onto the pages of other important journals: Terence M. Holmes, "Classical Blitzkrieg: The Untimely Modernity of Schlieffen's Cannae Programme," *Journal of Military History* 67 (2003): 745–71; Holmes, "Schlieffen and the Avoidance of Tactics: A Reinvestigation," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27.4 (2004): 663–84; Foley, "Preparing the German Army." See also Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 193–97 and 278–79, n. 21; Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:163–77; Citino, *German Way of War*, 199–200; Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 163–64.

66. In 1988 the Soviet Union returned documents to the German Democratic Republic that the Red Army had captured in the Second World War, and these documents were subsequently transferred to the military archive of the Federal Republic, located in Freiburg i. Br., after the East German regime ceased to exist. Major portions of these documents are now available in Zuber, *German War Planning*; see also Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*. Zuber's assessment of these sources: Zuber, "Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," 269–72, 285; Zuber adds nothing new to this evaluation in his book. A more sober and nuanced view of these sources: Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 92–99.

Reichsarchiv and the descendent of the General Staff's military history sections. The value of the source lies in the access Dieckmann had to war planning documents and memoranda from Schlieffen that were destroyed in the Second World War. Dieckmann summarized and quoted from these documents in detail. Unfortunately, his study ended abruptly before he analyzed the famous December memorandum. Dieckmann nonetheless revealed a variety of plans that differed from the December memorandum. He also showed how Schlieffen maintained an option to deploy the main part of his forces to the East. Zuber concludes, "At no time did [Schlieffen] commit himself to one perfect plan. In case of war, he clearly intended to adapt his plan to the changing political, strategic and operational situation."⁶⁷ Based on Dieckmann's evidence, this is a fair statement. Indeed, Zuber points out that there never was a plan to defeat France in forty-two days. Not even in his December 1905 memorandum did Schlieffen attempt such a feat, although he certainly emphasized the need for speed.⁶⁸

Zuber, however, overreaches the power of his sources, when he concludes, "In the west front [Schlieffen] clearly preferred to conduct the counter-offensive against a French attack. The eventual advance into

67. Zuber, "Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," 285.

68. The origins of the alleged six-week time frame for the Schlieffen plan are unclear. See *ibid*, 298; Holmes, "One Throw."

France was ideally a continuation of this counter-offensive. Only if the French stayed on the defensive did he reluctantly envisage an offensive into France.”⁶⁹ While a French attack would have delighted Schlieffen, the German invasion of Belgium and France was not an eventuality dependent on French actions. It was a certainty. Zuber attempts to reinforce his contrary conclusion by taking exercise critiques written by Schlieffen in 1905 as indications of his war planning intentions at the end of his tenure. But whereas Dieckmann appears to have seen the origins of Schlieffen’s December plan in his earlier thought, Zuber claims the December memorandum “was an isolated aberration” and “an orphan.”⁷⁰ Schlieffen had never left Prussia undefended in the east prior to the December memorandum, and he had never before proposed a march on Paris, let alone an offensive that swept to the west of the French capital. Between 1898 and 1905, Zuber argues, “Schlieffen’s operational thought was moving in the direction of the use of rail mobility to launch surprise counteroffensives to encircle and destroy the enemy on or near friendly territory, and not toward deep penetration into enemy territory.”⁷¹

69. Zuber, “Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered,” 284–85.

70. Ibid, 285; Zuber, “Orphan.”

71. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, 219.

Zuber's ultimate intent is to undermine Ritter's critique of German militarism, which Ritter defined as the inordinate influence of the military on policy that was properly the realm of political leadership. For Ritter, the Schlieffen Plan epitomized the kind of narrow military thinking in the German officer corps that eclipsed any true strategy.⁷² Ironically, Zuber makes his critique in operational terms even narrower than those in which Schlieffen and his successor ever thought about war. In an idiosyncratic reading of the evidence, he takes the defining feature of the December 1905 memorandum to be its proposed march around Paris. Zuber reifies this march into the plan itself, instead of analyzing the underlying principles of Schlieffen's thought that led him to this giant offensive. Thus Zuber can stretch his analysis into the younger Moltke's tenure and make the extraordinary assertion that "Moltke's concept of the operation in France in 1914 . . . had nothing whatsoever to do with the 'Schlieffen Plan'."⁷³ "Although the German right wing was designated [by Moltke as] the main German force, there was no mention of the right wing passing around to the west of Paris." Moltke's plan included contingencies for decisive battles closer to the frontier, as had Schlieffen's own General Staff war games. For

72. Zuber, "Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," 268–69; Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, 5; Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 92, 114–15; Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk*.

73. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, 258.

Zuber the mere possibility of the German right wing's taking advantage of a French attack on its left wing and marching south well short of Paris rendered Moltke's plan in 1914 "the very antithesis of the Schlieffen Plan."⁷⁴

Zuber immerses himself so deeply in the specifics of the many operational scenarios he analyzes for the period 1891 to 1914, that he becomes blind to underlying operational principles that Schlieffen and Moltke worked hard to inculcate in their General Staff subordinates through war games, staff rides, and written assignments.⁷⁵ Zuber also leaves Schlieffen's and Moltke's image of war unexamined. Nonetheless, his work is the first extended analysis of Schlieffen's operational thought that centers on what Schlieffen did during his tenure as Chief of the General Staff. Schlieffen, after all, produced his notorious December memorandum and his most famous and frequently quoted articles in retirement.⁷⁶ In this sense Zuber's work offers an important correction to our stereotyped view of Schlieffen's war planning, which has tended to limit itself to scolding Schlieffen for inconsistency and lack of realism. If the narrowness of Zuber's

74. Ibid, 263.

75. See Foley, "Preparing the German Army."

76. "Der Krieg der Gegenwart" (1909) and "Cannae" (1909–13), in Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2 vols. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1913), 1:11–22, 25–266; see also Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, 163–233.

approach limits the value of his conclusions, their provocation and the freshness of his sources has encouraged Terence Holmes and Robert Foley to take up his project of “reconsidering the Schlieffen Plan.”⁷⁷ Unlike Zuber, however, these historians do not deny its existence.

Like Zuber, Holmes assumes that Schlieffen was neither senile nor incompetent; however, Holmes does not accept Zuber’s argument that the December memorandum was merely an artifice to argue for more troops. Schlieffen’s plan was a genuine project for war. In the course of their debate, Holmes addresses the two apparent inconsistencies in the plan that bother Zuber. First, he reminds us that the plan was written for a one-front war and that there was an objective reason for this shift: the Russian state and army had been substantially weakened by the Russo-Japanese War and subsequent revolution. Zuber has dismissed this situation by pointing to a German intelligence report that stated that Russia still had a considerable number of troops in Europe. Holmes, however, points out that this single source only reported on numbers and did not indicate anything about Schlieffen’s perception of Russia’s ability to go to war. Besides mustering linguistic evidence from the December memorandum, Holmes points to

77. This was the title of his initial 1999 foray against the then monolithic historiographical consensus on Schlieffen.

published sources that show Schlieffen himself felt that the Russian army was in no position to fight, a case that Foley has meanwhile bolstered with archival sources.⁷⁸ Second, Holmes addresses the apparent discrepancy between the number of troops available in 1905 and the troops Schlieffen's plan required. On one hand, Schlieffen intended to form additional corps right at the beginning of the war, when he assumed control of the army. On the other hand, Schlieffen wrote his plan with the projected army strength for 1906 in mind, which was somewhat larger. Using the latter figure was natural, because of the long lead time that passed between the chief's initial formulation of a war plan and the General Staff's preparation of the details.⁷⁹

Holmes' most valuable contribution to this debate is a close reading of the December memorandum itself, which he shows was nuanced and context-aware.⁸⁰ Schlieffen designed his plan for a specific situation: he reckoned with the probability that France would have to fight alone in the

78. Holmes, "Reluctant March"; Holmes, "Real Thing," 115–16; Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 99–104; see also Foley, "Origins," 227–29, and Oliver Lothar Griffin, "The German Army Looks East: Perceptions of Russia in German Military Leadership, 1871–1914" (Ph.D. diss, Harvard University, 1998), 156–58.

79. Holmes, "Real Thing," 113–15; Holmes, "Asking Schlieffen," 467–72. See also Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 104. Cf. Zuber, "Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," 266–67; Zuber, "Holmes Reinvents—Again," 94–96; Zuber, "Orphan," 222–23. The war planning process: Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*.

80. Holmes, "Reluctant March."

aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War and subsequent Russian revolution. Without Russia's assistance, however, France would remain on the defensive, thereby rendering any counter-offensive impossible. If the French army would not come out of its strong fortified positions, the German army would have to go around these positions by invading Belgium and the Netherlands. Maps of the plan show a giant German wheeling movement that extended around Paris, but this movement was not the absolute that Zuber and the rest of the historiography make it out to be.⁸¹ Schlieffen saw France as "a great fortress," by which he meant much more than the "almost impregnable" fortifications on France's border to Germany. Holmes explains:

Schlieffen's memorandum explores the formidable depth of the French defensive system, identifying a whole series of positions to which the enemy might withdraw in order to offer sustained resistance. As Schlieffen's argument unfolds, it becomes clear that one of his main concerns was to analyze the intractable problem the German army would face if the French adopted a defensive posture not just 'at first', but consistently throughout the campaign. It is true that he comments repeatedly on how advantageous it would be for the Germans if the French were to counter-attack, but these remarks are invariably guarded; Schlieffen keeps his optimism firmly in check, and the main line of his argument makes full allowance for the contrary assumption. In this case it would be up to the Germans to ensure that the campaign did not congeal into positional warfare: 'The attack must never be allowed to come to a standstill as happened in the war in the Far East.'

81. Most recently, Herwig, *First World War*, 61; Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*.

Schlieffen's analysis led him to conclude that his right wing had to be strong enough to deal with a series of strong French defensive positions, including one anchored on Paris. Hence the German army had to be prepared to march around Paris, if that became necessary.⁸² Holmes shows that the December memorandum differed from widespread historiographical stereotype of a tightly scripted campaign that downplayed any possibility of wartime friction. Schlieffen's plan was the logical outcome of stringent operational thought that paid heed to the realities of modern warfare.

It is important to be clear about these heterodox conclusions. Holmes does not argue that the Schlieffen Plan was a good idea. The strategic criticism of Schlieffen's plan stands: Schlieffen addressed a strategic problem with an operational plan that would draw Great Britain into the war. Nor does Holmes argue that the plan was operationally feasible. That hypothetical question does not interest him, although some might read his arguments in this way. Holmes' achievement has been to demonstrate the December memorandum's seriousness as a war plan.

Recently Holmes has reinforced his case by demonstrating that Schlieffen's plan was informed by a solid understanding and utilization of modern tactics. Holmes writes that the grand sweep of Schlieffen's

82. Holmes, "Reluctant March," 211–14, quote 212.

operative plan has led Herbert Rosinski and others to suggest that Schlieffen tried to design an operational plan that rendered the result of actual fighting a foregone conclusion. According to their reading, the December 1905 memorandum was not an answer to the tactical challenges of modern war, but an escape from them. Furthermore, according to the same reading, Schlieffen emphasized operative excellence for his General Staff at the cost of tactical know-how. Holmes demonstrates that this view is inaccurate. First he reminds us that General Staff officers were selected on the basis of tactical excellence.⁸³ Holmes main argument, however, focusses on two other areas: Schlieffen's efforts to create mobile heavy artillery formations and his emphasis on the frontal assault as a necessary component of enveloping maneuvers.⁸⁴

83. Holmes, "Schlieffen and the Avoidance of Tactics," 665–66. On role of tactics for admission to the War Academy, the War Academy's curriculum, and selection for the General Staff, see Chapter 1 above. In his memoirs, Groener recalled three important books from his time in the War Academy (*Lebenserinnerungen*, 57–59, 61), all three of which focussed on tactics: J. Meckel, *Allgemeine Lehre von der Truppenführung im Kriege*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1890); D. von Malachowski, *Scharfe Taktik und Revuetaktik im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1892); Woide, *Die Ursachen der Siege und Niederlagen im Kriege 1870: Versuch einer kritischen Darstellung des deutsch-französischen Krieges bis zur Schlacht bei Sedan*, trans. Klingender (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1894–96). See also verse about the "highest art" of tactics in "Taktik," [Kriegakademie], *Culminationsfest Hoersaal IIB 1905–1908*, n.p.: "Was nur das Leben dem Soldat / An Schönem je zu geben hat, / Was bei uns steht in höchster Gunst, / Das ist der Taktik hohe Kunst."

84. Holmes, "Schlieffen and the Avoidance of Tactics." Cf. Herbert Rosinski, *The German Army* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 126–30.

Before Schlieffen, heavy artillery had been reserved for besieging fortresses, but Schlieffen foresaw the need for this kind of firepower on the battlefield, because he believed that the enemy could resist conventional field artillery by digging in. Schlieffen felt strongly enough about this project to lobby the Kaiser (successfully), and he emphasized the need for General Staff officers and corps commanders to include heavy artillery in their exercises and war games. Nor was interest in tactics incidental to Schlieffen's operational ideas. In his December memorandum, he foresaw using heavy artillery for massive frontal assaults from Verdun to Paris in support of German troops who marched around Paris. Holmes shows that this type of thinking was a constant in Schlieffen's exercise critiques.⁸⁵ In 1902, for example, Schlieffen told his officers, "An envelopment must be combined with a frontal attack. If it is attempted in isolation, the enemy will be able to spare troops on his front and march them to his threatened flank in order to frustrate the envelopment or even turn it into a victory for himself."⁸⁶ This kind of thinking had deadly implications for the attacking forces, but, as Echevarria shows, it was not the product of naiveté about the twentieth-century battlefield.⁸⁷

85. Holmes, "Schlieffen and the Avoidance of Tactics."

86. Quoted in *ibid*, 677.

87. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*.

Foley agrees with Holmes' reading of the December 1905 memorandum as well as his conclusion that this document, in Foley's words, "was not the aberration in operational thinking that Zuber believes it to be, but instead was grounded in concepts developed over the years of Schlieffen's tenure as chief of the General Staff."⁸⁸ In 1898 Schlieffen proposed a plan for the following deployment year that was similar to his December 1905 memorandum. Foley writes, "One sees the concentration of the majority of the German forces in the west, the outflanking movement through Luxembourg and Belgium with a powerful right wing, and the emphasis on a rapid, decisive victory." Furthermore, both plans provided for "a variety of possible scenarios once the campaign was underway." Unlike the 1905 memorandum, the earlier one even foresaw a Russian attack into Germany. Zuber, following Ritter, nonetheless believes that these two plans were not related, because of their significant differences. The earlier plan called for a much weaker right wing and a "shallower envelopment." The earlier plan also assumed a French advance.⁸⁹ Foley accounts for these differences with new evidence. Besides the different strategic situation in 1905, when France was expected to be Germany's only enemy and therefore

88. Foley, "Origins," quote 223; Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan."

89. Foley, "Origins," 226–27.

remain on the defensive, he points to an important development in German fortifications. Before 1905 Metz was not secure against French heavy artillery. Hence, a strong German right wing in Belgium could be outflanked on its left. By 1905, however, Metz's fortifications had been upgraded enough for Schlieffen to use it as a secure pivot on his left for a deep march through Belgium with a strong right flank.⁹⁰

To sum up, Foley and Holmes both show significant continuities in Schlieffen's thought, and they offer important contextual evidence as to why Schlieffen could seriously propose such a brazen operational plan in his December 1905 memorandum. But how can we explain why the younger Moltke used a comparable plan in 1914?

Foley's analysis of Moltke's deployment sheds much light on this question. Like Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum, Moltke's deployment plan for 1906–7 foresaw no conflict with Russia, which was still too weak. Moltke concentrated his forces in the west and emphasized a powerful offensive through Belgium and the Netherlands, including a march on Brussels.⁹¹ Significant reforms in Russia, however, made it an increasingly dangerous

90. Ibid, 230–32.

91. Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 105–6.

opponent, as German intelligence reports and Moltke's own assessments made clear during the last four years of peace. Foley summarizes:

Its defeat in the Russo-Japanese war had prompted an updating of its combat regulations, the dismissal of unsatisfactory officers, and the purchase of modern, mobile artillery, resulting in a more tactically capable force. Moreover, the railway building plan and improvements in mobilization procedures made the Russian army more strategically flexible.

Russia created an army in its heartland that was not vulnerable to attack, but that could be quickly deployed to where it was needed. In short, Russia was becoming more dangerous than France, but only the French army was accessible to a German strike. Foley agrees with Förster "that Moltke feared a long war," but, Foley writes, "it is also clear that he hoped for a short one," because Germany's strategic situation demanded such an outcome.⁹² Such was the power of the army's "imperative to succeed" that Hull describes.⁹³

Meanwhile, France was upgrading its defenses, too. Already in 1906 Moltke observed that it had fortresses protected by three meters of armor, but German heavy artillery could penetrate only one meter. On the other hand, France did not begin modernizing its fortresses on its Belgian frontier until 1912, and Belgium's own fortifications were much weaker than France's. Thus in 1912 Moltke could conclude that

92. Ibid, 106–9, quotes 108.

93. Hull, *Absolute Destruction*.

only by an advance through Belgian territory can the French army be attacked in the open and beaten . . . This operation is more likely to bring success than a frontal attack against the fortified French eastern front. Such an attack would force the conduct of the war to take on the character of fortress warfare, which costs much time and saps the spirit and the initiative from the army.⁹⁴

The striking similarity of this operational concept to Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum does not mean that Moltke adopted the latter's plan hook, line, and sinker. He made significant adjustments to it, for which he was maligned after the war by Groener and other Schlieffen apologists. Moltke reduced the strength of the German right wing in relation to its left wing from 7:1 to 3:1, in order to ensure that no German territory would be surrendered to France. He judged such a loss would cause domestic political trouble. More significant for the German war planning process were two other decisions. First, in 1913 he discontinued the practice of maintaining a second deployment plan for a war that focused on Russia, because he determined that a war with France was inevitable. Even if Russia were to move alone against Germany, Moltke believed Germany should use the opportunity to force a reckoning with France as well. This decision removed what little flexibility had remained in German deployment plans. Second, Moltke determined that attacking the Netherlands was a bad idea, because

94. Quoted in Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 110.

Germany would need that country as a trading partner, should the war not end quickly. This prudent move increased time pressure on Germany's initial deployment plans. To accomplish Moltke's offensive through Belgium, Germany had to move massive numbers of troops through a twelve-mile wide corridor, for which it first needed to capture the important railroad facilities in Liège, Belgium intact. This requirement increased the already great pressure for Germany to mobilize and invade its western neighbors as soon as either France or Russia began to mobilize. Pressure for rapid success in France was also higher than ever before, because Russia's improved rail facilities enabled it to mobilize and deploy against Germany in significantly less time than it would take Germany to beat France in the best of circumstances.⁹⁵

Foley concludes that "all the evidence points to the fact that Moltke intended to strike France first via a powerful right wing advancing through Belgium." Moltke's plan was prepared for other contingencies too. Nonetheless, at its center lay the concept that Schlieffen had laid out in 1905. "The only way Moltke could be sure of defeating the French quickly was to take the offensive, and this he did in no uncertain terms in the

95. Ibid, 110–14.

summer of 1914.”⁹⁶ This fact in particular makes Zuber’s more far-reaching conclusions impossible to accept. Germany did not follow a defensive war plan in 1914.

The historiographical debate about the Schlieffen plan has yielded an image of German war planning that resembles the broad outlines of the traditional Schlieffen plan narrative—but with some important differences. German war planning did not insist on scripting an entire campaign. Nor was it naive about the effects of modern firepower or the character of warfare more generally. The Schlieffen plan was not the product of one man’s obsessive mind, but rather arose in a particular matrix of German military culture and threat perceptions.

The Schlieffen Plan debate underscores the need to distinguish between General Staff officers’ antebellum images of war and their postwar representations of Wilhelmine war planning. If the prewar evidence will not permit Zuber’s charges that Groener “invented” the Schlieffen Plan to stick, Holmes’ and Foley’s work shows that there are discrepancies between what Groener knew about war and German war planning before 1914 and how he wrote about it after 1918. After all, Groener promoted the Schlieffen

96. Ibid, 115. On Moltke’s war planning cf. Holmes, “Reluctant March,” 222–31.

stereotype that the historiography adopted and Holmes and Foley have convincingly criticized. So what did Groener know about war before 1914?

Groener's Prewar Expectations

Groener's work in the General Staff informed his antebellum image of war. The General Staff had a topographical section that produced maps of the terrain upon which operations would be conducted. It had sections that analyzed foreign military capabilities and sections that studied military history in order to glean the lessons of past wars for use in the next war. (Table 6) There was also a section to plan the army's annual maneuvers. In functional terms, most important were the operations section and the railroad section. The former developed deployment plans and in wartime would help the chief of the General Staff direct operations. The latter worked out a reliable and timely military travel plan to realize the aims of the operations section. In peacetime the railroad section performed this labor-intensive task in an annual work cycle that began on April 1st and was ready for implementation by the end of the following March.⁹⁷

97. Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*; Kommandierungen, BHStA, KA, Generalstab 310; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 72; Hermann von Staabs, *Aufmarsch nach zwei Fronten: Auf Grund der Operationspläne von 1871–1914* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1925), 12. As the General Staff grew, its organization evolved. Schmidt-Richberg, "Die Generalstäbe in Deutschland," 33–35; "Die Organisation des Grossen Generalstabes," BA-MA, PH3/124.

Groener's personal papers do not contain any remnants of the top secret military travel plans that the railroad section prepared, but among them are reams of documents from the war games and other military exercises in which he participated over the course of his peacetime career.⁹⁸ Drawing on this material, Arden Bucholz shows that the railroad section was a linchpin of German war planning, and he argues that it influenced the work habits and self-understanding of the General Staff as a whole.

The [Great General Staff] was a new kind of organization shaped by knowledge. As the Prussian army became dependent upon railroads, the task of size, space, and time coordination created a new kind of officer. The General Staff officer became one who gave consistent, dependable, technical performance: he was interchangeable. His goals were functional reliability and high work capacity. The [Great General Staff] ethos derived from its technical core, the railroads."⁹⁹

According to Bucholz, this ethos supported a distinctive image of war as something that could be mastered with science, organization, and bureaucratic process. "The replacement of animal and human power by steam power in one stage of the war plan assumed the guise of a guarantee."¹⁰⁰ For Bucholz the mechanized phase of the war plan—that is, mobilization and deployment of the armies to the frontier by railroad in

98. On the closely guarded secrecy with which the military travel plan was held, see Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, 39. On the status of German war planning documents more generally, see Foley, "Real Schlieffen Plan," 94.

99. Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*, 320.

100. *Ibid.*, 319.

accordance with the General Staff chief's operational purposes—constituted the decisive element of the war plan. "The essential task of the commander was fulfilled long before the declaration of war."¹⁰¹ Fighting also had to occur, but like war planning itself, success was supposedly promised by the General Staff's stringent system of training with war games and operational exercises. In this context, argues Bucholz, expertise was more important than character in the General Staff.¹⁰²

Bucholz makes an important point, but he overstates it. While the military exercises in Groener's papers were certainly the product of efforts to foster reliable military know-how and interchangeability among General Staff officers, they were informed by an image of military leadership that entailed both expertise and character. In a trenchant critique of Bucholz's technocratic interpretation of the General Staff ethos, Martin Samuels points out that General Staff officers were not only functional experts who performed specialized tasks in order to help their commanders win battles, but also leaders who in the course of their careers performed command functions in their own right. General staff officers were more likely to attain the rank of general than their non-General Staff counterparts.¹⁰³ Over the

101. Ibid, 213.

102. Ibid, 317. See also Creveld, *Command in War*, 151–52.

103. Samuels, "Directive Command," 38–39, which draws on statistical evidence

course of their careers, General Staff officers rotated between General Staff duty in Berlin and a series of staff and command positions in the field army. When not commanders themselves, General Staff officers assigned as chiefs of staff at the divisional level and higher worked in close partnership with their commanders, with whom they shared responsibility for their units' success or failure in a system of dual command. This responsibility was heightened by the German army's decentralized command system, often called *Auftragstaktik* ("mission tactics" or "directive command"), whereby senior commanders laid out their objectives to their subordinate commanders, while leaving the latter wide latitude in how to achieve their respective tasks. In this context, reliable expertise alone did not make the leader. Also necessary was character, that is, specific qualities of mind that the officer corps deemed necessary for combat leadership.¹⁰⁴

General staff officers understood war in terms of decisive battles. Obtaining positive results in battle depended on officers' abilities to make good decisions in a timely manner, so as to take advantage of any weaknesses or mistakes of the opposing side. The aim of General Staff war games and exercises was not to provide General Staff officers with a

from Hughes, *King's Finest*, 105–23.

104. Samuels, "Directive Command."

formula for victory. Rather, these activities honed officers' operational skills and fortified their steadfastness and decisiveness, so they would be able to take advantage of opportunities that arose when in contact with the enemy, no matter how adverse the circumstances. Hermann von Staabs, who like Groener after him led the railroad section's western deployment group and then the whole railroad section, explained after the war that no matter how certain one was of the enemy's circumstances and one's own capabilities,

the operational plan is not an arithmetic problem. For theoretical considerations lead to different conclusions, and the more important war experiences of earlier campaigns can only yield certain principles, whose utilization depends on one's particular opinion and the altered conditions of modern warfare.

More important . . . than the sober consideration of all circumstances are the responsible person's qualities of mind, temperament, and character. For not operational plans are decisive for success in war, but rather the execution of the decisions. Indispensable for this are an assured power of judgment, willpower, confidence of the supreme commander in himself, his subordinate commanders, and troops, as well as boldness [*Kühnheit*] and an innate talent for command [*Feldherrnbegabung*].¹⁰⁵

Victories could not be blueprinted in advance. War required commanders with both the military know-how and the firm character necessary to win battles in fluid and complex situations.¹⁰⁶

105. Staabs, *Aufmarsch nach zwei Fronten*, 10.

106. Groener's understanding of leadership was informed by the same functional elements that the U. S. Army today cultivates in its officers. See *FM 22-100: Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1999), which breaks down leadership thus: "Be, Know, Do." See also Christopher Kolenda, ed., *Leadership: The Warrior's Art* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Foundation Press, 2001); Ed Ruggero, *Duty First: A Year in the Life of West Point and the Making of American Leaders* (New York:

Groener's antebellum articles revealed an almost identical understanding of military leadership in war. Take, for instance, his critique of an article by a Lieutenant Schulz on moving advancing infantry through firing artillery. Schulz proceeded from the infantry regulations, which stated that one could hurry through in either open order or closed formation. He believed that the regulation's wording suggested that moving in open order was preferred, but, using mathematics, he argued that marching in closed order was better.¹⁰⁷ Criticizing Schulz's starting point, Groener wrote that the position of "open order" before "closed formations" in the regulations indicated no particular preference.

The regulation only wants to declare the utility of both forms, and it is worded so that the leader has complete freedom to choose the form that seems most useful to him in each individual case according to the circumstances, goal, and terrain. Therein lies the strength of our still insufficiently appreciated regulations, which one should be wary of diminishing . . . The leitmotif runs through all of our tactical regulations in a clear and sound manner that the requirements of the individual situation should alone be decisive for the choice of means and form.¹⁰⁸

Hence, he concluded, it was not a matter of whether "closed formations or open order" was better. Instead one needed to ask, "which factors in the individual case speak for the application of the one or the other form?"

Perennial, 2001).

107. Otto Schulz, "Wie durchschreitet die Infanterie eine feuernde Artillerielinie?," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 96.41 (28 March 1911): quote 937.

108. Wilhelm Groener, "Gruppenkolonnen oder Schützenlinien beim Durchschreiten feuernder Artillerie?," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 96.81 (1911): quote 1889–90.

Likewise, in an article on the reconnaissance duties of cavalry divisions, Groener cautioned against proposing a specific tactical formation to master all situations. One could learn from such theoretical discussions, but one should avoid seeking the security of a “method.” “As in all military situations, so too with reconnaissance is the individual case to be considered.”¹⁰⁹ Since no particular method would suffice on the battlefield, the army needed top-notch leaders who were capable of making and executing decisions appropriate to the situation. Like previous wars, the Russo-Japanese War demonstrated that during hostilities it was much easier to correct

erroneous tactical forms than false views and qualities [*Eigenschaften*] in the leaders. The battlefields of Manchuria have furnished the unmistakable proof that not tactical forms, not the best textbook training guarantees [*verbürgen*] victory, but rather first and foremost the spirit of the leadership, which united with the spirit of the troops is passed down to the last rifleman and expressed in willpower.¹¹⁰

Hence, in all of his tactical articles Groener emphasized the necessity of realistic (*kriegsmäßig*) training not only of soldiers, but also officers.¹¹¹

109. Groener, “Aufklärungsdienst der Kavalleriedivision,” *Militär-Wochenblatt* 96.20 (1911): 423–26, quote 423.

110. Groener, “Manöverleitung u. Truppenführung,” *Neue Militärische Blätter* 1 (1911): 281.

111. See especially *ibid* and Groener, “Maschinengewehr-Taktik,” *Neue Militärische Blätter* 1 (1911): 217–20. Realistic training was the central theme of one of three books from his War Academy time that Groener praised in his memoirs: Malachowski, *Scharfe Taktik und Revuetaktik*. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 59.

Maneuvers needed to be conducted in such a way that troop commanders could practice making independent decisions, such as would be required of them in war. “Only then do the mental powers of the leaders attain true effectiveness; only in this way lies the guarantee that we are cultivating [*groß ziehen*] good leadership qualities.”¹¹²

Besides promoting realistic training appropriate to modern warfare, Groener expressed concern about the vigor of the officer corps in 1911. In *Die Grenzboten* he wrote, “If we have not yet come as far as Prussia before 1806 in the generally recognized over-aging of the officer corps, the pace of promotions in the last decade has become so bad that it is unquestionably time again to earnestly recall the conditions for success in war.” In order to win wars, the army needed above all else “courageously responsible, self-starting leaders in all ranks” Such qualities were more common among younger officers.

As well suited as the experience of increasing years in service is for reinforcing one’s discernment [*Wägen*] and, depending on one’s personality, for increasing the clarity and sharpness of one’s judgement, it must be recognized that daring [*Wagen*]*—*the cheerfully responsible courage, to act on one’s very own decision, without waiting for orders from above or, according to the circumstances, deviating from these orders*—*is a special gift of youth.¹¹³

112. Groener, “Manöverleitung u. Truppenführung,” 281.

113. Groener, “Schaffung und Heranbildung der Führer für den Krieg,” 423.

Groener's understanding of military leadership in war was part of a broader, coherent view of how to fight and win wars. He laid out this view in a 1911 article about Russia's military leadership in the Russo-Japanese War, which he based on the Russian General Staff's official history. He began the article with reference to the Russian General Carl Voide's well-received book, *The Causes of the Victories and Defeats in the War of 1870*.¹¹⁴ Significantly, the book only analyzed the war up to the Battle of Sedan, that is, it confirmed the German General Staff's image of war as something that was settled by decisive battles. Voide recognized the role played by Prussia-Germany's diplomacy, supreme military leadership, and military organization. The most immediately decisive factor for him was the independence of action that Germany's subordinate commanders enjoyed, as well as their willingness to seize the initiative. Groener quoted Voide:

In the German army the intentions and decisions of the top military leadership were not just carried out by the subordinate commanders, but further developed and completed—a practice that sometimes resulted in completely unexpected favorable results for the Germans. The subordinate commanders also often knew how to correct the more or less unavoidable mistakes made by their superiors.

In the French army a system of oppressive centralization prevailed that always and everywhere sought to place all decisions in the hands of the higher leadership.

114. Voide, *Die Ursachen der Siege und Niederlagen*. Groener still held this book in high esteem when he wrote his memoirs in the 1930s. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 59.

French combat officers ended up waiting for orders that came late, if at all. Voide concluded that “the subordinate leaders on the German side functioned as ‘multipliers’ that increased the driving power of the leaders, whereas the activity—or rather inactivity—of the French leadership served as a ‘divisor’ that weakened the already insignificant efforts of the higher leadership.”¹¹⁵

Voide overstated the coherence and effectiveness of Germany’s decentralized command system, but he captured an important aspect of German war-making. German corps and army commanders tended to exercise their independence at cross purposes with each other and the intent of the General Staff chief. They attacked the first enemy force they could get their teeth into, without regard for the broader operational situation.¹¹⁶ General Steinmetz’s bungle at Spichern in 1870 was but the most famous example.¹¹⁷ Given the size of forces involved, the vast areas they covered, and the state of communications technology, it was difficult for the chief of the General Staff to exercise firmer command and control. Differences of opinion existed as to how much independence subordinate

115. Wilhelm Groener, “Die russische Führung im Krieg gegen Japan,” *Stuttgarter militärische Blätter* 1 (1911): 99. See also Groener, “Die Führung im Angriffsgeist der Infanterie,” *Neue Militärische Blätter* 1–2 (1911): 298–300, 5–6, 27–29, 46–48, 201–2.

116. Citino, *German Way of War*.

117. *Ibid.*, 174–78.

commanders should have. Schlieffen himself foresaw exercising tighter control, whereas Moltke preferred to leave his commanders more room for independent initiative.¹¹⁸ Groener hedged somewhat on this issue. In another article he expressed guarded optimism about the ability of the military leadership to maintain control over large armies as they maneuvered, but he believed that reasonably reliable communications were necessary. The most serious challenge for command and control, however, was posed by the infantry attack.

Leading great army units today has in some ways been made easier by technology [*technische Verkehrsmittel*]. A lasting connection between the supreme commander of the army and the commanders of the individual units can be maintained in most cases; in this way there is a certain guarantee of the leaderships' congruence, even if it is undeniable that this requirement is more significant for the movement of today's mass armies than for the smaller armies of earlier times. What has become more difficult in all respects is leadership in the infantry attack.¹¹⁹

It was in the attack that the independent actions of the battlefield commanders, informed by their appraisal of their respective situations and their understanding of the broader operational intentions of the General Staff chief, would make or break the German army.

In his article on the Russo-Japanese War, Groener wrote that the Russian leadership in Manchuria in 1904–05 was characterized by “a lack of

118. Foley, “Preparing the German Army,” 17–20.

119. Groener, “Die Führung im Angriffsgeist,” 298.

independence and a dread of responsibility. . . . Where any capacity to judge and decide was still present, it was forcibly extirpated from above by the chain of command [*Befehlsgebung*].” To make matters worse, “the holy fire of warrior genius did not burn in the soul” of the supreme Russian commander, General Kuropatkin. On this point Groener quoted Schlieffen, who was at the time still alive, on how a supreme commander had to be “permeated by something superhuman, supernatural, whether one calls it genius or something else.”¹²⁰ No amount of professional training and expertise could overcome the lack of the right inner qualities. On the other hand, the right character did not obviate the need for education and training. Hence Groener accused the Russian leadership of professional incompetence.

The troops gave proof of perseverance and courage in the most difficult situations, so that recognition cannot be refused them. What they lacked in tactical training, especially for how to act in the attack, can be put down to the intellectual tedium [*geistige Stumpfsinn*] of outdated training, which in turn can only be blamed on the leadership that did not form a sharp instrument of war in its serious peacetime work. The Russian leadership, ignoring all the war experiences of 1870–71 and 1877–78, believed it could make do with parade ground tactics. In this sense may the Russo-Japanese War serve as an warning [*momento*] to the German army!¹²¹

120. Groener, “Die russische Führung,” 99. See Schlieffen, “Der Feldherr,” Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:3.

121. Groener, “Die russische Führung,” 174.

Groener's analysis comported with broad German military stereotypes of Russian soldiers and officers; however, his interest lay not with the state of Russia's officer corps and soldiery. He was concerned about the German military, which he believed could learn from Russia's mistakes.¹²²

The war had begun with the Japanese surprise torpedo attack at Port Arthur on February 15, 1904.¹²³ The attack demonstrated "ruthless [*rücksichtslose*] initiative," which for Groener was an admirable and necessary quality in war. Kuropatkin responded appropriately by planning "a great and broad operational goal" He would act defensively while he assembled his forces. "But then he wanted to go over to the offensive with the ultimate goal of not only driving the Japanese out of Manchuria and Korea, but even landing in Japan and destroying the Japanese territorial army, without even shrinking back from a fight against a national uprising."¹²⁴ These plans were appropriate in Groener's mind, because they offered a complete operational solution to the strategic problem that Japan's attack had created.

122. See Griffin, "German Army Looks East." The example of the Russo-Japanese War appeared repeatedly in Groener's antebellum articles: Groener, "Die Führung im Angriffsgeist"; Groener, "Die russische Führung"; Wilhelm Groener, "Gefechtsausbildung und Drill," *Neue Militärische Blätter* 1 (1911): 170–71; Groener, "Manöverleitung u. Truppenführung"; Groener, "Schaffung und Heranbildung der Führer für den Krieg."

123. An accessible operational study of this war: Connaughton, *Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear*.

124. Groener, "Die russische Führung," 99.

Groener's next sentence was more astonishing. "A general with such great plans—worthy of a Napoleonic genius—seemed to be the natural commander [*geborene Feldherr*] for their realization."¹²⁵ This statement reflected a core element of the military culture in which he was steeped and which underlay Schlieffen's and Moltke's war plans: the positive value of tremendous risk-taking.¹²⁶ The very boldness of Kuropatkin's plans spoke in their favor. Moreover, Groener took them as an indication of Kuropatkin's greatness and hence his plan's potential for success. This line of argumentation offered an important insight into Groener's attitude towards Germany's own offensive war plans, which risked everything right from the start. For Groener, the daring of Schlieffen's plan was evidence of its worthiness.

Analogous to his understanding of the supreme commander's personal role in war was his explanation of Kuropatkin's failure. "External material factors did not bring about the failure of the supreme command; it was the psychological breakdown of a competent general who faced a titanic task, but who was not granted the *feu sacré* of the commander [*Feldherr*]."¹²⁷ This interpretation prefigured the main themes of his critique of Moltke

125. Ibid, 99.

126. Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 117, 164, 166, 170–71, 175.

127. Groener, "Die russische Führung," 100.

after 1918. Groener did not need to invent the Schlieffen Plan or intentionally distort Moltke's image. He already possessed the prerequisite understanding of war and leadership before the Great War began.

A key tenet of German operational thought was that it was best to assemble all of one's forces for a crushing blow at the point where a decision could be expected.¹²⁸ Schlieffen was willing to trade land and even suffer battlefield defeats for a significant operational success, which would undo any set-backs incurred in the interim.¹²⁹ Even when success was not guaranteed, action had to be risked. Indeed, it was better to act and not succeed than not to act or merely react.¹³⁰ Groener's critique of Russia's decision-making was informed by the same beliefs.

For years Russia had to prepare itself for the fight with Japan and recognize that big decisions require a big investment [*Einsatz*]. Instead of concentrating all possible available forces in the Far East, where the first big decision was imminent, we see before and after the war began how the Russian military leadership could not stop worrying about the empire's western frontier. While General Kuropatkin already had his eyes on the comprehensive plan of landing in Japan as his operational goal, the view of the dangerous German neighbor clouded his eyes and made his heart heavy.¹³¹

128. Samuels, "Directive Command," 23–25; Foley, "Preparing the German Army," 11–13.

129. Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*.

130. "Actionism" is a major theme in Hull, *Absolute Destruction*.

131. Groener, "Die russische Führung," 100.

Russia's army knew that a conflict with Japan was inevitable, so it should have planned for a final reckoning with that country, no matter what negative implications such a strategy might have had for its strategic posture vis-à-vis Germany. This was the same logic that informed the German plan to risk everything on the offensive through Belgium against France. Indeed, it suggests that Groener was mentally prepared to abandon parts of East Prussia, Alsace-Lorraine, and southern Germany in order to deal a final blow to France. Here too, the ground was already fertile for the operational disputes in which he engaged after the war, when he argued that Moltke should not have been distracted by events in locations that were secondary to Germany's main operational effort—a strong right wing through Belgium and into France.

Groener faulted Russia's constant withdrawals in the war. "This concept, which basically was not supposed to be anything other than a kind of strategy of attrition like the events of 1812, stood in the sharpest contrast to the war aim of asserting Russian hegemony [*Vorherrschaft*] in the Far East, which required a rapid decision."¹³² Informing his analysis and German military culture more generally was the notion that success came to the side that seized the initiative and forced the other side to react to

132. Ibid, 100.

one's own actions. Groener criticized the Russians for ignoring this tenet.

Referring to one of the Russians' many withdrawals, he wrote,

But the positive intention and the will to victory was not decisive [*bestimmend*] in any of the Russian military leadership's considerations. Fear of defeat [and] worry about the rear captivated all minds in the field and homeland. The leadership did not cast its gaze forward towards the enemy; it kept stealing glances [backward] towards Harbin in the secret hope that by that point the Japanese would be weakened enough and the Russians strengthened enough to be able to turn the tables of fortune in war.¹³³

This kind of thinking lay at the heart of Imperial German war planning.

The fighting had to be brought to the enemy with ruthless force for a crippling victory. No other strategy was thinkable.

In his article on leadership in an infantry attack, Groener explained his thinking thus:

The supremacy of the annihilation concept for the leadership goes so far that it is always preferable in problematic [*zweifelhaft*] and bad situations to attack with full force, instead of vacillating and waiting to see what the enemy decides. Willpower overcomes apparent and real difficulties, as all war experiences confirm. Uncertainty about the general and specific aims of the battle undermines willpower and leads to indecisiveness, waiting and wavering, to weakly expedients and finally defeat.¹³⁴

The first two sentences of this passage mirrored the fundamental justification for Germany's war plan in 1914. The last sentence described the *raison d'être* for the army's operational exercises.

133. Ibid, 101.

134. Groener, "Die Führung im Angriffsgeist," 5.

Groener echoed these sentiments in his article on the Russo-Japanese War, using the rhetoric of weakness to describe Russia's leadership: "misgiving, doubt, hesitation," "weakly . . . prosecution of the war," "fear of the great decision," "half measures," "indecisiveness and inactivity," "uncertainty about the goals and the absence of all initiative."¹³⁵ Japan's leadership, by contrast, was characterized by "superior spirit and will." Japan's example was important, because Japan had achieved victory against superior numbers. Germany would have to do the same in its next war, which would be on several fronts.¹³⁶

Groener's emphasis on willpower and character did not mean that he was blind to the physical effects of modern firepower. In an article that argued the need for more frequent and realistic machine-gun training for offensive warfare, he wrote,

It would be a dangerous mistake to console oneself with the moral effect of the attack; where machine guns are used, they must be able to achieve a rapid and certain effect in all situations, or else they will easily fall victim to the enemy's fire, and with greater likelihood in the offensive.¹³⁷

Groener chose his words carefully. He was not trying to spare machine gunners from casualties. The point was to get the greatest possible effect

135. Groener, "Die russische Führung," 100, 102, 149–50.

136. Ibid, 100.

137. Groener, "Maschinengewehr-Taktik," 218.

out of them before they were killed. Colonel Meckel, the War Academy instructor of whom Groener thought most highly, wrote in his widely read textbook,

A middle ground exists between timidity in incurring casualties and useless sacrifice of the troops . . . The leadership must want to prevail; the avoidance of unnecessary casualties is correct, but it is hard to know where to draw the line; the avoidance of “such” and “such great” casualties is contrary to the nature of war.¹³⁸

A willingness to accept high casualties was especially necessary in the context of offensive warfare, which Germany’s military leadership “knew” it had to pursue if it wanted to defeat its enemies.

As important as willpower, energy, and effective, stalwart leadership were in Groener’s mind, he recognized that there was a difference between showing character and merely being stubborn. He quoted Clausewitz: “Strength of character becomes obstinacy as soon as unwillingness [*Widerstreben*] to adopt different ideas arises not from superior convictions, not from trust in a higher principle, but from an antipathetic [*widerstrebend*] feeling.”¹³⁹ Groener’s training and socialization were so thorough that he saw no reason to question his own assumptions about war. In his eyes and those of most other military professionals, the Russo-

138. Meckel, *Allgemeine Lehre*, 194, original emphasis. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 57–59, 61.

139. Groener, “Die russische Führung,” 151.

Japanese War offered no evidence that a war of movement could not be fought with the technologies and armies of the day.

Aside from the fact that the operations on both sides were tied to the railroad and the great Mandarin Road because of the terrain and above all else the road conditions, trench warfare [*Stellungskämpfe*] in Manchuria was brought about primarily because of the character [*Eigenart*] of Russian strategy, in which the desire to achieve victory was far outweighed by the fear [*Sorge*] of suffering any defeat. Trench warfare was a consequence of the Russian strategy of attrition and the character of the theater of war. The circumstances for our European theaters of war are considerably different; here passability and means of transport support a completely different operational freedom of movement, so that, like before, we can strive to bring about great decisions through fast, surprising, and crushing operations. It would be completely wrong, if we wanted to see in the Manchurian trench warfare a new, peculiar guise of modern warfare that was worth imitating.¹⁴⁰

If trench warfare in Manchuria was due to Russian strategy and poor transportation infrastructure, it could be avoided in the Europe. Groener saw in the Russo-Japanese War a warning of what could happen, but the Manchurian trenches did not prove that a war of movement in Europe was impossible. The operational and tactical lessons of the Russo-Japanese War seemed to confirm, not threaten, Groener's understanding of war.

140. Ibid, 153. The professional military reception of the Russo-Japanese War: Griffin, "German Army Looks East," 127–63; Christian Müller, "Anmerkungen zur Entwicklung von Kriegsbild und operativ-strategischem Szenario im preussisch-deutschen Heer vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," *Militargeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 57 (1998), 398–402. See also Keith Neilson, "'That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise': British Military Thinking and the Russo-Japanese War," *War & Society* 9.2 (1991): 17–37; Howard, "Men against Fire," 52–57.

Groener's image of war reflected the same assumptions that underlay Schlieffen's December 1905 memorandum, as well as its antecedents and descendants. His duties, however, led him into activities that had the potential to challenge his own understanding of war. Groener's war planning concerns encompassed not only Germany's trained, patriotic manhood in a large, professionally led army with modern armaments, but also the country's entire railroad infrastructure, which by 1908 comprised over 57,000 kilometers of full-gauge track and almost 11,000 kilometers of narrow-gauge and light rail track. Running this system in 1908 were over 718,000 civilian workers and administrators.¹⁴¹ Because of Germany's federal structure, the railway system was run by a complex array of mainly state railway authorities with which the railroad section had to cooperate in peacetime, but over which it held authority in wartime.¹⁴² Because Groener was positioned at the fulcrum of the German army's operational and logistical war effort and thereby had acquired significant experience working with both military and civilian authorities, he made a natural choice for General Staff contacts with civilian authorities in connection with

141. *Das deutsche Eisenbahnwesen der Gegenwart*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1911), 1:36.

142. Ibid; Mitchell, *Great Train Race*; Lothar Gall, "Eisenbahn in Deutschland: Von den Anfängen bis zum ersten Weltkrieg," in *Die Eisenbahn in Deutschland: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Lothar Gall (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999), 13–70.

economic preparations for a general European war. He participated in the Permanent Commission for Economic Mobilization Questions, which was established in December 1912.¹⁴³ In his capacity as chief of the railway section, he integrated trains into the military travel plan to supply essential goods to civilians in urban areas during the army's mobilization and initial deployment. Earlier the military travel plan had halted all non-military traffic.¹⁴⁴ After the war he also claimed to have proposed unsuccessfully that Germany buy a two-year supply of grain. Although unsubstantiated, this assertion was consistent with Moltke's own attitude.¹⁴⁵ In 1907 the latter argued, "The interests of the people can . . . no longer be separated from those of the army." He wanted to find out how Germany would fare in a war that cut it off from foreign trade.¹⁴⁶ Whether or not Groener acknowledged the possibility of a long war and advocated a massive purchase of grain before 1914, he certainly began to understand war in more than just operational terms. In the end, however, his analysis of the Russo-Japanese War confirmed that economics was subordinate to military operations. For Groener and his fellow officers, battles decided wars.

143. Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge*, 165, 58.

144. Ibid, 211.

145. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 135.

146. Quoted in Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge*, 164.

Schlieffen himself never denied the close links among war, economics, and politics. His image of war did not exclude modern material and political realities. It was a response to them. Schlieffen taught his officers that a long war was a possibility that could not be allowed to materialize. In his last war game, which took place near the end of 1905, Schlieffen played a two-front scenario in which he allowed Russia and France to move on Germany first, after which Germany defeated Russia and France in turn. While this scenario differed from the one in his famous memorandum, it was informed by the same fundamental image of war, which he repeatedly drove home to his subordinates.

In a future war we will have to deal with armies arrayed in long positions [*Stellungen*]. The possibility of holding off a superior enemy from even somewhat strengthened field fortifications will result in more instances of trench warfare [*Positionskrieg*]. The Russo-Japanese War has shown this. Far away in Manchuria, it is possible for both sides to fight for months at a time from unassailable positions. In western Europe, however, one cannot allow oneself the luxury of such a strategy. The military machine with its thousands of wheels, costing millions to maintain, cannot stand still for long. One cannot fight a war for one or two years from position to position in 12-day-long battles until both combatants are completely exhausted and weakened and are forced to sue for peace. We must attempt to defeat our enemies quickly and decisively.¹⁴⁷

Schlieffen's thinking informed Groener's 1911 interpretation of the Russo-Japanese War. Moltke harbored similar fears and he, too, trained his

147. Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, 126; see also, for example, Schlieffen's General Staff rides of 1901 and 1903, *ibid*, 51–52, 59, 62–63.

General Staff officers to conduct mobile operations and win decisive battles as quickly as possible.¹⁴⁸

The railroad section's initial task was to establish an optimal starting position for the German armies by executing a successful military travel plan. The railroad section also had to move the victorious German army from one front to the other, so that it could defeat its enemies in succession. As Schlieffen told his officers during a General Staff ride in the east in 1901,

Germany . . . has an advantage: it lies between France and Russia, separating these two allies from one another. However, it would surrender this advantage if it divided the army, each part of which would then be inferior in numbers to each of her enemies. Germany must, therefore, endeavor to defeat one enemy, while keeping the other at arm's length. Once the first enemy has been defeated, it must employ the railroads to build up a superiority fatal to the other enemy in the other theatre of war.¹⁴⁹

Groener pursued this logic further when he instituted "railroad operational war games" to prepare his staff to handle unforeseen and altered transports not just between fronts, but along one front, in order to exploit quickly every opportunity that arose.¹⁵⁰

148. Foley, "Preparing the German Army"; Moltke, "Besprechung der Schlusssaufgaben 1911" and "Besprechung der Schlusssaufgaben 1913," Groener Papers, N46/104, fols. 115–22, 130–35.

149. Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, 51–52; see also 54, 61, 76.

150. "Eisenbahn-Operations-Kriegsspiel 1913," Groener Papers, N46/106; "Eisenbahn-Operations-Kriegsspiel 1914," Groener Papers, N46/107. See also Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 133.

Groener's concern with using the railways to support an unrelenting offensive found expression in an important logistics exercise he conducted in 1906, soon after Moltke had assumed leadership of the General Staff. The operational context of this exercise was a German counteroffensive through Belgium against France, which had begun an offensive through Luxembourg and southern Belgium. German forces were supposed to live off the land as much as possible, but Groener was under no illusions as to how reliable such a system would be, especially given the current size of armies and the relatively small areas through which they had to march. "When securing rations for our modern armies of millions, it is not enough that the responsible persons make arrangements just in time. They needed to take care of things far in advance and with their measures anticipate the needs and directives of the leadership." Groener argued that the statistics the army possessed on provisions that could be requisitioned during offensive operations gave a false sense of security.

Much too little thought is given to how difficult the exploitation of supplies in the country is, how especially during a long, decision-seeking, unstoppable advance the gathering of supplies can hardly keep pace with the speed of the forward movement. This factor needs to be taken into consideration that much more, because in peace we are not able practically to exercise and prepare for it.¹⁵¹

151. "Besprechung der Aufgaben aus dem Gebiet des Etappenwesens und Feldverpflegungsdienstes 1906," BA-MA, N46/103, fol. 29.

Groener exercised with scenarios where the harvest was bad, where German troops were unable to collect and distribute food and fodder in a timely manner, and where units depended on rails for supply, but where rails first needed to be brought back into service. He also had his men react to logistical changes necessitated by French advances on the Germans' left flank. The exercise exemplified the "deep-future-oriented war planning" that Bucholz emphasizes.¹⁵² Groener was trying to minimize frictions in a German offensive through good preparation. He was trying to ensure that Germany's mobile operations remained mobile and did not degenerate into a stalemate. At the same time, however, he understood how much depended on the energetic and frequently improvised actions of his officers and railroad officials in the midst of an offensive. Hence he promoted the General Staff ethos of competent, energetic, self-starters. Germany's soldiers had to advance "with all the speed that human legs can achieve . . . in order to envelop and destroy the enemy forces." Such an offensive would only be possible if the railroads ensured that the German advance was not slowed down by lack of bread and oats.¹⁵³

All authorities must be dominated by the firm will to pitch in with all their powers, so that the operations are not slowed down by

152. Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*, 12.

153. "Besprechung der Aufgaben aus dem Gebiet des Etappenwesens und Feldverpflegungsdienstes 1906," BA-MA, N46/103, fol. 30.

supply problems. The sense of responsibility must be so great that in difficult situations one frees oneself of all regulations and acts on one's own responsibility solely according to common sense.

The saying is valid in this area too:

“Omission incriminates more than making a mistake in the choice of means.”¹⁵⁴

Groener knew that both meticulous planning and strong, competent, leadership were required to create the fluid operational situation that the General Staff needed in order to deal a decisive blow to France. Groener's confidence and firm image of war prevented him from even thinking about how realistic the General Staff's war plans were. At issue for him was ensuring that the officer corps was up to the huge task, so the German army would not become bogged down in the kind of trench warfare that Russia and Japan had experienced in Manchuria.

Like other German military leaders, Groener was not blind to the challenges posed by modern firepower and armies of millions in an age before tanks, large numbers of dependable trucks, and effective battlefield

154. Ibid, fol. 31. Cf. Crevelde, *Supplying War*, 119 and 262, n. 29, which misinterprets this exercise as a study by Groener of the Schlieffen Plan's viability, which Groener allegedly found unworkable.

communications. Nor did he and his superiors believe that military campaigns could be as tightly scripted as the postwar Schlieffen Plan stereotype seemed to suggest. (Schlieffen and Moltke never tried to script a campaign.) Under these circumstances, Groener could not—and did not—conclude that the next European war would automatically be short. Rather, the German army had to make it as short as possible. The probable consequences of failure were a grueling war of attrition and, in the end, Germany's defeat.

It does not follow, however, that Groener believed in the possibility of a short war only because it seemed to be Germany's sole viable military option. The above analysis of his image of war reveals a thought world in which Schlieffen's operational ideas were compelling to him and his comrades. Wars were decided by battles, and victory went to the side that dictated when and where fighting would occur. One could not shrink before vastly superior numbers; it was important to achieve local superiority at the decisive point, which depended not only on careful prewar planning, but also on the ability of commanders to exploit mistakes the enemy made. Commanders also required boldness and a steady hand, so that they did not get distracted by apparent successes of the enemy in places secondary to the

operation's overall purpose. Schlieffen's operational ideas did not buck German military culture; they grew out of and were reinforced by it.

Groener's work in the railway section made him aware of how economic factors could inhibit Germany's ability to fight, but the dangers posed by a long war confirmed for him the correctness of Schlieffen's thinking. Instead of concluding that a short war was impossible, which his institutional position and professional ethos would not permit anyway, Groener fine-tuned the railway section's ability to keep operations from slowing down and getting stuck. He also embraced and fostered the officer corps' leadership ethos of expertise, character, and the deed.

4. 1914

On May 2, 1913, Groener wrote to his wife, Helene, about the most recent crisis in the Balkans: “There has been no unexpected incident in international politics; I hope my peace [*Ruhe*] will not be disturbed. . . . Actually, it would be insane if such a Balkan war of conquest could unleash a great European war.”¹ Some fourteen months later, however, after hearing about the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his consort in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, he wrote to his wife, “In my opinion, it was a bad mistake that the Triple Alliance did not go to war earlier, the last time in November 1912, before Russia had already become stronger.”² This second opinion was consistent with the General Staff’s attitude towards war more generally. If it was inevitable, as most believed, then it was better to initiate hostilities on one’s own terms, that is, attack at the operationally most favorable moment. Groener did not participate in the decision to go to war in the summer of 1914, but Moltke, chief of the General Staff, advocated war for these reasons. Germany should use the crisis in the

1. Letter to Helene, Mannheim, May 2, 1914, BA-MA, N46/D. On the military-political context of these remarks, see Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912–1913: Prelude to the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2000).

2. Letter to Helene, Stuttgart, June 29, 1914, BA-MA, N46/D.

Balkans to deal with France and Russia once and for all, before Russia grew so strong that victory was impossible.³

On August 17, 1914 Groener wrote Helene from Supreme Headquarters in Coblenz about the beginning of “a war, such as the history of mankind has never seen and . . . will not see again very soon.”⁴ In order to attain a decisive military victory in this “great struggle for the future of the German people,” Germany was throwing everything it had into a massive offensive through Belgium against France.⁵ “One must always go all the way, never be satisfied with half measures; the golden mean is worthless in war,” he wrote his wife on August 21st.⁶ Two days later he noted with pleasure her growing enthusiasm.

You are becoming completely hawkish [*kriegerisch gesinnt*]. I am very glad about that. You can be certain, that we in the General Staff are doing a good job [*ganze Arbeit machen*], so that if things go according to us, the German people will have peace for the next 100 years. The imperial chancellor and his people, however, seem to see the war as a political concept and are not averse to agreeing to a rotten peace as early as possible. That won't happen; we'll deal not only with the French, but also Mr. von Bethmann and the slackers [*Trödler*] from the Foreign Office.⁷

3. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*. See also Wolfgang J. Mommsen, “The Topos of Inevitable War in Germany in the Decade before 1914,” in *Germany in the Age of Total War*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1981).

4. Letter to Helene, Aug. 17, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 5.

5. “Kaiserliche Anerkennung über die Mobilmachung” [written by Groener], newspaper clipping in diary, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 2.

6. Letter to Helene, Aug. 21, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 8–11.

7. Letter to Helene, Aug. 23, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 12.

On August 29, he repeated to her his hope that Germany's victory would be so thorough that Germany could impose a lasting peace on Europe. "We have to become so strong that everyone will be afraid of us for at least 100 years." This goal required the Germans to show "much hardness and little humanity [*Menschenliebe*] to the enemy. May hundreds of thousands of French, Belgians, Russians, and whoever else is against us perish [*zu Grunde gehen*], if only in the process our people [*Volkstum*] grows stronger."⁸

The year 1914 proved decisive, but not in the way that Groener had hoped. Far from Germany's defeating its Western neighbor and then turning to grind down its Eastern neighbor, Schlieffen's worst fear was realized. France halted Germany's great offensive on the Marne, and a long war of attrition began.⁹

8. Letter to Helene, Aug. 29, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 18.

9. The historiography on the First World War is enormous. Some idea of the diversity and complexity of the material can be gleaned from the published results of two conferences, Michalka, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*; Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2000). An excellent recent overview of the war is Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (2004; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005), whose author is writing a massive three-volume work with the same title, the first of which was published by Oxford University Press in 2001. Two recent, complementary overviews of the war that center on Germany's experience are Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, which is especially strong on the domestic side of the war and also contains a useful bibliographical essay, and Herwig, *First World War*, which focuses on German and Austrian military operations on the war's diverse fronts; see also the historiographical essay, Chickering, "Imperial Germany at War."

After the war, Groener became a fervent proponent of Schlieffen's failed operational ambitions. Why? Zuber seeks an answer in the postwar era, when Groener supposedly invented the Schlieffen Plan in order to protect the General Staff's reputation in the wake of defeat. However, the previous chapter's findings on Groener's prewar expectations suggest that his postwar Schlieffen apologia reflected a deeply rooted understanding of war that Groener had acquired in the Wilhelmine era. This chapter clarifies this connection by examining how Groener experienced the war's initial mobile phase in August and early September 1914, and then the transition to a war of attrition, which he grudgingly recognized but never accepted or contemplated losing during the remainder of the same year. The chapter is limited to 1914, because Groener exhibited the basic mental orientations towards the war in its first five months that informed his experience over the next four years, before Germany's ultimate military defeat.¹⁰

Mobile Operations

On August 17, 1914, Groener wrote to Helene from Supreme Headquarters in Coblenz that the war had only just begun. "In any case I have done my

10. Diary, BA-MA, N46/22–23; letters to Helene, BA-MA, N46/31–32. This material has been thoughtfully extracted by Hiller in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*.

part . . . Everything worked superbly. Mobilization and deployment, nothing was disrupted or held up.” Years of planning and training had paid off. Now it was time for the Chief of the General Staff to make those operative decisions that would lead Germany to victory. “The deployment was completed today, and now may we show whether not only the name, but also the spirit of the late Moltke is with us.” On this day “pivotal decisions” would be made that the German people would not know about until “the decision became an accomplished deed.” Patience was necessary, “because with armies of millions everything takes much time.” He also warned his wife not to worry if bad news came out of Alsace-Lorraine. “Now that the whole army is ready, things do not depend on the little side trips [*Extratouren*] that are taken here and there. Only the big, unified operations of the whole army will bring the decision, and—God willing—we are on the right path for that.”¹¹

Groener’s understanding of German operations in Belgium and France in August 1914 mirrored Schlieffen’s concept of the *Gesamtschlacht*, which Holmes calls “a total or composite battle comprising a number of separate but synchronous parts.”¹² Schlieffen had

11. Letter to Helene, Aug. 17, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 5–6.

12. Holmes, “Schlieffen and the Avoidance of Tactics,” 681.

described the effect he wanted to produce in his famous “War of the Present” essay (1909):

What matters is not spatial proximity but inner cohesion. What matters is that the one battle should be fought in order to secure victory on another battlefield. It is in any case certain that the total as well as the partial battles [*die Gesamtschlachten wie die Teilschlachten*] . . . will be played out across fields and spaces that dwarf the settings of earlier martial deeds.¹³

The idea was to place unremitting pressure on the enemy in several places at once, in order to maintain the initiative, dictate the pace of the fighting, and give the enemy an opportunity to reveal weaknesses and make mistakes.¹⁴ In this fluid system, combat could be inconclusive in Alsace-Lorraine, or German units might have to retreat there. Nonetheless, these units would be engaging forces that the French could otherwise use elsewhere. Meanwhile other German forces could work towards the overall German objective of outflanking and destroying as many French forces as possible. Since it was physically impossible to annihilate the French army in a single blow in one gigantic location, the Germans strove for major operational successes in several places, the net effect of which was supposed to be the destruction of French fighting capacity. These components of the

13. Quoted in *ibid*, 681. The article is available in Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:11–22, and in translation as “War Today” in Foley, *Schlieffen’s Military Writings*, 194–205.

14. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 188–97, 212; Holmes, “Schlieffen and the Avoidance of Tactics,” 681.

Gesamtschlacht are what Groener had in mind when he wrote of decisive German blows in the letters and diary entries that followed. At the same time, however, he clearly expected the main German effort to be on the right wing, where operational mobility was least difficult to achieve. Herein lay the prerequisite for the ultimate success of Germany's western offensive.

On August 19th, he wrote Helene, "the French have been acting really timid till now." No sign of "a powerful offensive" anywhere. "Hopefully they do not run away from us, so that we can settle up with them most thoroughly."¹⁵ On August 21st he recorded in his diary, "so far everything has gone according to plan, right wing forward Brussels."¹⁶ The next day he wondered where the English were. "Just let them come! Our most ardent wish is to achieve no 'ordinary' victory against these scoundrels but rather one à la Schlieffen."¹⁷ Here he meant a decisive encounter with the British, not the whole campaign in the west, although this encounter would make a significant contribution to the overall campaign. His reference to Schlieffen this early in the war was significant too, for it showed his intellectual loyalties well before the failure of Moltke's advance on the Marne.

15. Letter to Helene, Aug. 19, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 7.

16. Diary, Aug. 21, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 2.

17. Diary, Aug. 22, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 4.

Supreme Headquarters was still located in Coblenz, but Groener placed enough stock in reports from field commands to believe that by August 23rd he could inform his wife, “The war in the western theater is already won now.” In the same letter he wrote, “my business is flourishing,” but “one must always keep in mind that one cannot allow oneself to become too cocky because of the amazingly fast, dazzling course of our operations in the west,” which, he believed, were progressing as the General Staff had conceived of them in peacetime. Germany’s troops were of course excellent, he wrote, but the main reason for its army’s apparently strong operational posture was the weakening of France’s military leadership.¹⁸ Groener was not simply offering good news in order to make his wife happy. The next day he noted in his diary that German forces appeared to be in the process of entrapping significant French forces.

Overall impression yesterday already: the war against France has been decided, even if it drags on. Maybe there will be another big catastrophe for the *Rothosen**—Sedan is nearby. Three Schlieffen beatings cannot be ignored—Entre Sambre et Meuse in the north, in the middle by Sedan, in the south by Baccarat!!

In the same entry he noted that he had issued his first order for provisional preparations for the transfer of troops to the east, although he understood

18. Letter to Helene, Aug. 23, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 12–13.

* Literally “red pants,” this term was used in the 1870–71 war, but the French were still wearing red trousers at the beginning of the First World War.

that the fighting was still fierce in the west. “It will hardly be possible to pull out an army corps so soon.” The previous day he had issued orders to make the trains towards Paris operational.¹⁹

Meanwhile, operations in the east were not going as well as he had hoped. True, Eighth Army was outnumbered, but General Staff officers had trained for such a situation. At fault, in Groener’s opinion, was weak leadership. On August 23rd he wrote to his wife, “Count Waldersee [Eighth Army chief of staff] and his commander [General von Prittwitz] have not won any laurels in our eastern theater of war. Fainthearted worries” kept them from making the kind of bold decision necessary in such a situation.²⁰ Prittwitz had ordered a retreat behind the Vistula, which Waldersee supported. In Moltke’s eyes, however, this step was only to be taken as a last resort. He had wanted the Eighth Army to seize the tactical and operational initiative against the invading Russians, so he relieved Prittwitz and Waldersee of their posts and assigned Hindenburg and Ludendorff in their places.²¹

19. Diary, Aug. 24, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 7–8; partially quoted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 160.

20. Letter to Helene, Aug. 23, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 13.

21. Showalter, *Tannenberg*, 139–205.

On August 24th Groener noted in his diary that “the course of events in the east has shown that the planned deployment . . . was not suitable for an average leader, despite the many hours Schlieffen had taught operations as expedients [*Aushilfen*].”²² This was the Achilles heel of Groener’s leadership concept. Commanders and their chiefs of staff needed to be nearly superhuman. While they shared a common understanding of war, they were not sufficiently united by a common operational doctrine, except the stricture to avoid systematizing operational and tactical solutions. In this context commanders and their chiefs of staff were expected to anticipate their superiors’ and the enemy’s intentions in unforeseen, unclear situations and make bold, inspired decisions that produced positive results, which would also support the independent decisions of commanders in other sectors, with whom they had little, if any timely and effective communication.²³ Groener believed that excellent leadership informed by Schlieffen’s teachings should be up to this formidable task.²⁴ He wrote to his wife on August 23rd,

22. Diary, Aug. 24, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 9.

23. See “Groener’s Prewar Expectations” in the previous chapter. On the weaknesses of the German command system, see also Strachan, *First World War* (2001), 1:233–37.

24. An excellent study of Schlieffen’s and Moltke’s teachings: Foley, “Preparing the German Army.”

The spirit of the late Schlieffen accompanies us; the first memorial to this campaign belongs to the man who thought up all the ideas we are carrying out. It is wonderful how the great mind was blessed by Providence to foresee everything that must come. Where any leader stripped himself of [Schlieffen's] spirit, like Waldersee now in the east, it did not work.²⁵

Groener found his antebellum image of command in war confirmed by the still fluid operational situation. Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's victory at Tannenberg in late August and early September turned around the situation in the east and seemed to offer proof of the correctness of Schlieffen's operational teachings.²⁶

In the last week of August, Groener's diary entries and letters began to acknowledge potential problems in the west, even as he continued to maintain that the war there had already been decided. On the 24th he had a conversation with Lieutenant Colonel Dommes, chief of the General Staff's Political Section, "about Schlieffen's spirit in all the operations. Also talked about Moltke. Dommes too recognizes that danger lies ahead where [Schlieffen's] spirit is sinned against." It is not clear whether Groener was talking about Moltke's recent decision to order the Sixth and Seventh Armies to follow up on their apparent successes on Germany's left flank in Lorraine, or whether he was commenting on Moltke's general unwillingness

25. Letter to Helene, Aug. 23, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 13.

26. Diary, Sept. 1, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 16–17.

to restrict army commanders' independence. Groener's diary entry from August 22nd contains relevant, but probably misleading remarks. To his report of Moltke's joyful reaction to the apparent victory of the Sixth and Seventh Armies in Lorraine, he added a footnote in a different color with a different pen, probably after 1914, maybe even after the war: "Immediately spoke to Moltke about preparing for a troop movement to the right wing." And in the same ink as this footnote he appended to the end of the entry: "Moltke and Tappen [head of the Operations Section] do not want to hear anything about the redeployment [*Abtransport*]." ²⁷ Groener was referring to the need to make the Germans' right wing stronger, now that troops on the left could apparently be spared. Yet he was not in the habit of making such changes in his diary. Nor at this point in his life did he obsess about operational advice ignored by commanders and staff officers who understood too little about the operational use of railroads. There was too much hindsight in these comments for him to have made them in summer or autumn 1914, when events were still unfolding. He added them only after he had reached firm conclusions about what had gone wrong with the German offensive. The warning of historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker is appropriate here: "Memories—particularly traumatic

27. Diary, Aug. 22, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 4, 6. Groener's diction and use of abbreviations is also somewhat inconsistent with the the rest of his entries in this period.

memories—are always reconstructions and reworkings.”²⁸ If in the unlikely event that the additions to Groener’s entry for August 22nd nonetheless reflected his opinion from that time, it had not been so strong that he felt Moltke was making an irreversible mistake. In August 1914 he knew full well that it was Moltke’s right to make decisions without slavishly following his predecessor’s December 1905 operational proposal. As late as September 21st he wrote that Moltke had been a good leader until he had lost his nerve in early September on the Marne.²⁹ Harsh criticism set in only later, after he had more time to think about why the German offensive had been stopped.

One other potentially misleading reference to Moltke in Groener’s diary from that summer is also relevant in this context. On August 24th, Groener and Dommès “spoke about Moltke’s successor.” One of the candidates they discussed “lacks character, the second one understanding of the operational.”³⁰ These remarks were not part of a scheme to have Moltke dismissed. Rather they were timely gossip motivated by Moltke’s health,

28. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (2000; New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 44.

29. Diary, Sept. 21, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 37.

30. Diary, Aug. 25, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 10.

which had been declining since the beginning of the campaign and had led to his wife accompanying him with Supreme Headquarters.³¹

On August 25th, Groener noted, “It is turning out more and more that our victories on the whole front were of the ‘ordinary’ kind; at least we managed to surround great masses.” Nonetheless, he still felt the war was “probably decided,” although he was expecting further fierce fighting with high losses.³² On August 28th he wrote his wife about “the lightning fast advance that we have undertaken through Belgium.” He further noted, “Our right wing is only five days’ march away from Paris!!”³³ The next day he wrote in his diary that the French would probably not be able to hold out against Germany’s First and Second Armies, but he expected tough fighting in the middle, and a possible French breakthrough on the Germans’ left wing. “Victory there could become really unpleasant for us. On the other hand, the French will hardly be able to resist the temptation to push their forces more around Paris.”³⁴ On September 1st, he began to see the French as much tougher opponents, and he expressed some appreciation for the strain German forces were under. “The French are supposed to be fighting

31. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, 234.

32. Diary, Aug. 25, 1914, fols. 11–12.

33. Letter to Helene, Aug. 28, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 17. See also diary, Aug. 29, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 14.

34. Ibid, fol. 15.

very well on the Meuse, seem to be well led too!” In the south they held strong positions, while “our armies seem to have somewhat lost the desire to attack, because of the high casualties.”³⁵

On September 5th he wrote in his diary,

Hopefully the armies’ uncontrolled advances [*drauflosstürmen*] will now stop in the west and we will begin a period of calm war-making [*Kriegführung*], in order to bring about a crushing victory.

In my opinion, the uncontrolled advances of the Fourth and Fifth Armies were not in accordance with the idea that formed the basis of all the operations through Belgium. . . .

T[appen] spoke several times about the brutal force with which the operations had to be executed. — I believe a little less brutality and instead ordering the armies in the middle in the Schlieffen sense would have produced greater successes.³⁶

Groener was not using the term “Schlieffen Plan” yet, but there was “the idea”—Schlieffen’s idea—that lay behind the German offensive in Belgium. And he criticized Moltke for not directing the armies in the pivot between the German right and left flanks in “the Schlieffen sense.” By advancing, the Fourth and Fifth Armies pushed back French forces instead of helping to fix them so that the First and Second Armies could outflank them on their left. In the same diary entry he moved linguistically even closer to the plan he advocated after the war. He had heard about War Minister Falkenhayn criticizing Moltke for ineffective command. “There might be a

35. Diary, Sept. 1, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 16.

36. Diary, Sept. 5, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 21–22.

grain of truth in that, to wit, the Supreme Command did not check the uncontrolled advances of individual armies and hold on to the basic idea of the Schlieffen operation.”³⁷

Groener was frustrated by a seemingly intractable problem: “Our right wing has become too weak, the left too strong, but [it] still does not move forward.”³⁸ Here lay the seeds of his later critique of Moltke’s war plans. The next day he wrote to his wife, “Now we are already in the heart of France, before Paris, and yet cannot at all foresee how long the campaign will last. Despite all successes and despite the fact that the campaign, in my opinion, is already decided, the French will not give up so soon.” He believed a possible solution lay in the east. Germany needed more stunning successes like Tannenberg, in order to convince the French that the Russians would not be able to help.³⁹ Groener was beginning to doubt whether a complete operational decision could be achieved in the west.

The German advance into France was halted by the Battle of the Marne in the first half of September. The French had determined the intentions of the German advance and had moved effectively to counter it.

37. Diary, Sept. 5, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 23. On Falkenhayn at this time see Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994), 179–89.

38. Diary, Sept. 5, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 23.

39. Letter to Helene, Sept. 6, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 24.

Meanwhile a dangerous gap opened between the First and Second Armies, so the overextended forces pulled back across the Marne to regroup.

“There,” sums up Michael Howard grimly, “the Germans established themselves in positions that they were successfully to defend for the best part of four years to come.”⁴⁰

Groener first commented on the Marne disaster in his diary on September 13th, when he also first used “Schlieffen” and “plan” in the same phrase: “The situation is quite serious; the German front has been broken through between First and Second Armies . . . The ‘plan’ of the late Schlieffen has been lost [*abhanden gekommen*] for now.”⁴¹ True to his General Staff training both as student and teacher, Groener immediately began analyzing in his diary what had gone wrong. In his opinion, the main problem was that the army commands were not kept firmly under control by supreme headquarters, and their dispositions and movements were not informed by “the Schlieffen operational concept.” The plan had been “to go around Verdun with the left flank as strong as possible [but no stronger], [to have] strong forces near Metz, and above all else, however, [to have] a

40. Quote: Michael Howard, *The First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39. See also Strachan, *First World War* (2001), 1:242–62; Herwig, *First World War*, 96–106.

41. Diary, Sept. 13, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 27–29; parts of this diary entry reprinted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 526, 176.

deeply echeloned right wing north of the Meuse, [but] in Alsace-Lorraine only very weak forces.” If France advanced on the German left wing, the Germans were supposed to withdraw “to the Nied position and the middle Saar.” Instead they had fought a battle at Mulhouse on their left wing; pushed forward in Lorraine and the Vosges; become bogged down in front of strong fortifications; transported two corps to the east; and advanced west of Verdun before the right wing there had achieved victory, leaving the troops west of Verdun unable to be transferred to the decisive right wing of the overall operation. “In the end, great weakness of the right wing, which nonetheless was approaching Paris,” while “the Sixth and Seventh Armies [were] inactive in Lorraine and on trains!”⁴² In other words, Groener thought that German operational efforts had been undermined not by any hubris inherent in the plan, but by inadequate leadership.

Staying the Course

After mulling over the Marne debacle, the big question for Groener on September 13th was, “What should be done now?”⁴³ He knew that the

42. Diary, Sept. 13, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 29; quoted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 176–77.

43. Diary, Sept. 13, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 30; quoted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 176–77.

General Staff's war plan had failed, but he continued to trust in Germany's ability to achieve victory, if no longer quickly. On the 16th he wrote Helene,

Now we have been away from Berlin for a month already . . . The rapid course of victory has stopped; there will be some hard work to overcome before we can think about peace, and that will not be possible so soon. — Patience is being put to the test. It is a blessing that [in the General Staff] we have enough work to help us get through this. . . .

In the last few days there has been fighting almost along the entire front . . . The French try with the greatest effort to force a success somewhere. Till now, thank God, it has been possible to withstand their attacks. Nowhere a final decision. In the end it depends on who has the last fresh battalion available at the decisive point.⁴⁴

Groener appreciated the tactical significance of battlefield attrition, and perhaps even its long-term strategic implications. Nonetheless, in his eyes the war would be decided not by the side with the most ordnance and able male bodies, but rather by the side that could muster these things “at the decisive point” on the battlefield. Accomplishing this feat was the task of leadership. Groener had internalized this concept of war in peacetime and nothing in the war thus far gave him cause to doubt its validity.

On September 18th, he wrote Helene,

“Now the fighting between Verdun and Paris has been going on for almost twelve days without interruption; still no verdict [*grosse Entscheidung*] reached; however, for the past two days the fortunes of battle have been tilting more and more towards the German side, and if no more incident occurs, the French will be beaten in one or two days along the whole front. The battles . . . have been quite

44. Letter to Helene, Sept. 16, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 31.

murderous. The French tried again and again to attack at this or that point, were thrown back, and came again at another point. Great losses are the consequence for us of this sustained battle [*Dauerschlacht*] and presumably for the French even more so.⁴⁵

Groener's confidence in the qualitative superiority of German soldiers and officers underpinned his belief in ultimate victory for his country, but his expression of the still extant possibility of a victory in the near future appeared to be little more than an attempt to put a brave face on things. He was not blind to the extremely difficult tactical situation, about which he was also becoming better informed. In his diary on September 20th he noted a conversation with a Württemberger in another section of the General Staff, Captain Muff,* who had told him about the exaggerated reports of success that the Fourth Army had sent the General Staff in the initial weeks of the invasion, and apparently was still sending. In the same entry Groener revealed the reemergence of his disposition to realism, when he recorded the contents of a paragraph from a recent order from Fourth Army that Muff had shown him: "If the order of army headquarters seems unfeasible [*unausführbar*], it is to be executed [*auszuführen*] nonetheless'!" Groener found it "incomprehensible" how "such rubbish" could even be

45. Letter to Helene, Sept. 18, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 32.

* There were two Captain Muffs from Württemberg in the General Staff in 1914, one of whom, Friedrich Muff, worked in the topography section before the war started, but who might have been reassigned upon mobilization, and the other Wolfgang Muff, whose General Staff assignment is unclear. *Rangliste der Königlich Preussischen Armee* 1914, 24.

signed. He also learned that people in Muff's section saw printed orders from the Fourth Army "almost as joke books."⁴⁶

His realism did not lead him to the point of forecasting Germany's defeat. After expressing to his wife his commiseration with friends or relatives about the loss of their son, he wrote,

The casualties in this giant battle are also probably much greater than was expected or had been the case in earlier wars. For the moment, however, one has no proper overview of the casualty numbers. . . Individual units have really enormous losses. Only one thing is certain: the long duration of the battles and the dragging out of the decision with frontal battles. The late Schlieffen had warned us about that emphatically; but now it has come to pass that the German and French armies face each other for days on end in purely frontal battles, whereby in the end it depends on who possesses the most tenacity, keeps his nerve longer, and brings the last fresh battalion into the battle. God willing, it will be us.⁴⁷

The campaign's apparent confirmation of Schlieffen's image of modern war did not mean that Germany had lost, but it no longer offered Groener the optimism that it had in the initial weeks of the war.⁴⁸ Now patience and staying power were called for.⁴⁹

Erich von Falkenhayn replaced Moltke on September 14th, although the army kept this change from the public until November 3rd.⁵⁰ As

46. Diary, Sept. 20, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 36.

47. Letter to Helene, Sept. 20, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 34.

48. See esp. letter to Helene, Aug. 23, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 13.

49. Letter to Helene, Sept. 24, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 37.

50. See Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*; Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*.

stalemate emerged in the west, German forces attempted to break through fortified French positions. These were the costly frontal battles Groener found so unproductive. There was also some hope that the German forces could yet outflank its enemies on its right flank. The challenge was to find enough available forces and transport them on a still precarious railroad network ravished by war, while the French were able to operate on an excellent and fully functioning rail network in France's interior. Instead of outflanking the French and British, however, the Germans ended up playing leapfrog with them all the way to the English Channel. Mobile operations were over by the middle of November, and on the 25th Falkenhayn issued orders for German forces to hold the territory that they had overrun. This action was a temporary expedient that lasted the better part of four years, as German, French, and British positions remained entrenched from Belgium's coast in the north to the Swiss border in the south.⁵¹

Groener's diary entries and letters to his wife reflected these developments. While he clearly saw the emerging stalemate in the west, he did not give up on the German army becoming strong enough to force a decision—somehow, somewhere—on the western front. On September 22nd

51. Strachan, *First World War* (2001), 1:262–80; Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, 190–97.

he noted in his diary, “On the right wing finally managed . . . to bring together a mass.”⁵² He dared to hope that these forces might achieve a significant success there, but that dream was almost dead for him by September 28th.

A complete decision will hardly be achievable any more on our right wing. Our forces arrive only in dribbles, and if the French are attacked by superior German forces, they can pull their left wing behind the Somme so that we can no longer outflank it. Result: pure frontal battle like at Mukden, which we should have avoided under all circumstances and which is why Schlieffen always strove to make the right wing really strong in the first place and to that end [was prepared] to abandon Alsace-Lorraine to a French offensive.⁵³

Groener was beginning to develop the critique of Moltke’s initial war plan that he so stridently advocated after the war: Moltke’s alleged “weakening” of Schlieffen’s right wing.⁵⁴ Noteworthy was the context in which this critique emerged: the operational situation near the end of September 1914, not the postwar period, when Zuber claims Groener helped to invent the Schlieffen plan in order to preserve the General Staff’s reputation.⁵⁵

Having decided that outflanking the French and British on the German right wing was no longer possible, and remaining convinced that

52. Diary, Sept. 22, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 37.

53. Diary, Sept. 28, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 41; quoted, but somewhat modified in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 193. Groener also refers to the situation of the Japanese at Muken in his diary on Nov. 8, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 66–67.

54. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 79–80; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 93–96.

55. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, 1–51.

the new operational situation confirmed the correctness of Schlieffen's teachings, Groener might by this point have concluded that the war against France and Britain could no longer be won with mobile operations in the west. Besides trying to outflank the enemy on the right wing, however, German forces also continued to attempt to break through French positions elsewhere on the front. Groener had been trained to avoid purely frontal battles, but now he saw no alternative to this unpalatable tactic—if the Germans had adequate means. On October 16th, he wrote in his diary,

Finally the coast has been reached . . . Ostende. Now the attack on Verdun is urgent, so that our breakthrough attempt between Toul and Verdun does not completely collapse under the heavy artillery fire from the area north of Toul and southeast of Verdun. The breakthrough attempt was an attempt with unsuitable means and creates a constant danger for our left flank.

The strength of the front is greater than one believed before the war and the strength of fortified linear field positions is greater than that of forts. Redeploying troops by marching and on the railroad is easier to accomplish than had been expected.

In all these things Schlieffen had unique foresight.⁵⁶

Groener commented on breakthrough attempts the following week as well.

He did not oppose them on principle, but he bemoaned their failure because of the insufficient forces that could be committed to them.⁵⁷ He also saw offensives falter or fail because of inadequate supplies of ammunition where

56. Diary, Oct. 16, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 51–53.

57. Diary, Oct. 21 and 23, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 54–55, 58.

needed, although in this case he was concerned not with a potentially dangerous long-term strategic trend, but with inadequate logistical preparations before offensives were launched.⁵⁸

Groener recognized how manpower and ammunition shortages undermined the German military effort, but he saw no need to concede the war because of such problems. On the other hand, he had no use for excessive optimism. On October 28th he wrote Helene,

You have to imagine a 350-kilometer-long field position that is fortified on both sides . . . At home one must not think that the war will be over so soon. We are facing a considerable superiority among our enemies and have to balance out numerical inferiority with better achievements in battle. Reversals are, of course, also possible. We must not overlook that while numbers alone are not decisive in war, they are of such significance that the war . . . can still drag on for a really long time. This cannot be helped; it has to be seen through [*durchgefochten*]. The German people must be able to carry even changing fortunes in war with dignity and see in them only the stimulus for newer, greater efforts. Our first successes had led us to underestimate our enemies. That is why we must get used to celebrating fewer victories.⁵⁹

The failure of the German war plan and the onset of attrition were no reason to quit. The German army had to redouble its efforts. The imperative to succeed that drove Schlieffen and his successors to conceive an offensive war plan against superior numbers also motivated the General Staff to keep fighting after the plan had failed. Paradoxically, the military culture that

58. Diary, Nov. 2, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 62; reprinted in part in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 527. See also diary, Sept. 7, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 24.

59. Letter to Helene, Oct. 28, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 67–68.

informed the German war plan helped to spawn a response to its failure that was at odds with its strategic logic.

On October 31st, Groener mentioned a suggestion he had heard “that we let all our successes in the west go to hell [*scheissen lassen*], in order to defeat the Russians first!” In his eyes, this proposal was idiotic. Although he knew that the fighting in the west had reached an impasse, he believed—or hoped—that this situation was temporary, for he still wanted to maintain the main German war effort on the western front. Consistent with Falkenhayn’s current emphasis, he thought operations had to be pursued on the right wing. Significantly though, he did not use the term “decision.” Instead he wrote that in the west “a further, indeed greater success” had to be attempted, which he now defined as “advancing on the right wing.”⁶⁰ This goal was a far cry from his earlier emphasis on decisive battles of annihilation.

Groener’s remarks reflected an interesting shift in focus. He understood that the original war plan had failed, and he continued to ponder the Marne debacle, but he also tried to understand the current situation on its own terms, which included the occupation of enemy territory. While he had been trained to think of war in terms of operations

60. Diary, Oct. 31, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 61.

whose purpose was to destroy the enemies' armies, he now succumbed to the powerful impression made by German military control of most of Belgium and swaths of France. On October 21st, he wrote in his diary, "When one looks at the map, it is quite clear that the English must set everything on preventing the seizure of Calais. The whole war is becoming an existential question for England. The extension of our power to the channel means for England the wavering of its dominance on the seas."⁶¹ Viewing the presence of German troops on the coast as an expression of German power permitted Groener to shift his focus away from Germany's operational situation, which relative to German operational thought and material strength was a disaster.⁶²

Groener's remarks reflected another significant development: the English loomed ever larger in his mind, not least because these were the forces Germany faced on its right wing. On November 16th he wrote Helene that the war had probably cost more losses than any other the world had ever known. "Only God knows how long the war will last. If only there

61. Diary, Oct. 21, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 56; reprinted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 527.

62. On the many potential pitfalls of maps: Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps*.

weren't the damned English."⁶³ Later in the same letter he wrote about his adolescent daughter's attitude towards the enemy.

If Dore does not want to know anything about languages right now, I can understand it; and if it were possible to permanently forbid the English from residing in Germany after the war, this would not be bad. With the French one can sooner have pity. First, they loaned their good money to the Russians and now they've lost it. Now on England's orders they have their men beat to death, back into the Middle Ages—all so that England can fight down its economic competitors. All that about Belgian neutrality was balderdash! — There is still hard work [to do] till we have worn down the English.⁶⁴

Two weeks later he shared a perhaps apocryphal anecdote with his wife, according to which a French soldier had thrown a stone over to the German trenches with an Anglophobic message on it.

<i>Aujourd'hui ennemis</i>	Today enemies
<i>En quelque temps amis</i>	In some time friends
<i>Guerre</i>	War
<i>Contre Angleterre.</i> ⁶⁵	Against England.

Groener's attitude towards England had little in common with the arguments of "military necessity" that had informed the General Staff at the war's outbreak, when the main point had been to defeat France and Russia at a time of Germany's choosing, before Russia grew too strong.

63. Letter to Helene, Nov. 16, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 80.

64. Ibid, fol. 81; partially quoted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 528.

65. Letter to Helene, Nov. 28, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 89.

Groener knew by the beginning of November that the stalemate in the west might have consequences for civilians at home. On the 4th he wrote Helene,

You will do well to replenish your supplies and in general maintain sufficient supplies, because it cannot be foreseen what vicissitudes will accompany the war and how prices will rise. It is also advisable not to be rash with charity now and pile gift parcels on people who do not need them, as is now sometimes happening. It is amazing how much desire to give is in the people [*Volk*]: may it stay like this, even if—may God prevent it—there are more difficult days for Germany.”⁶⁶

He observed in his diary on November 8th that the “long, long line” had rendered operations impossible. Indeed, achieving a decision on the battlefield “no longer depended on the greatness of the leadership, but solely on the effect of the weapons.”⁶⁷ Here were potential seeds for a new understanding of war: attrition would decide the issue. He refused to pursue this logic to its ultimate conclusion, however, in part because he believed in the possibility of a breakthrough, which, if successful, would create a situation in which operational knowhow and inspiration would again come into play. At the same time, however, he became involved in the economic exploitation of Belgium. On December 6th he wrote Helene about the “enormous supplies of wool” that had been found in the Lille area. This was

66. Letter to Helene, Nov. 4, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 72; reprinted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 527–28.

67. Diary, Nov. 8, 1914, N46/22, fol. 66.

good news because of the wool shortage in Germany caused by Britain's blockade. The Germans found some leather too. Groener also described how the army had brought sugar beet factories in Belgium back on line, not just to provide the Belgians with sugar, but also to produce fodder for animals in Germany. "You see, we are conducting the war not only purely militarily, but also in a national economic direction, in order to extract as much value as possible out of the occupied territory for use in Germany."⁶⁸ Economic aspects of the war were that much more important, because the war against Russia also showed signs of becoming a long one. While mobile operations were possible in the east, Russia seemed to have unlimited manpower reserves upon which it could draw.⁶⁹

On December 10th, Groener wrote his wife that there was nothing new to report from the western front, and German troops in the east were still making slow progress.

One could write volumes about this strange war, whose peculiarity the late Schlieffen had clearly foreseen. How often he had warned about what has now happened in the west and is threatening to happen in the east—frontal positional battles that do not lead to great and rapid decisions but rather to the depletion of one's forces. If only Hindenburg could have another great victory in the east! It is probably quite good that the aged Schlieffen did not experience this war, for he would not always have liked it, especially not now, where

68. Letter to Helene, Dec. 6, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 93.

69. Ibid, fol. 92. On the eastern front, see Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975); Herwig, *First World War*.

in the west we stand before an almost impregnable French position—the French, by the way, [are] in the same situation.”⁷⁰

Revering Schlieffen and his teachings, Groener could both acknowledge and reject the military reality that Germany now faced, without changing his image of war. The World War was becoming a watershed event in European history, but it did not contradict antebellum professional knowledge of war, so it did not force Groener to rethink his attitudes towards Schlieffen’s military thought. Groener could try to come to terms with the current, surprising, intractable stalemate and work towards victory, no matter how slowly it came or how costly it was. At the same time, he could ponder what operational mistakes Germany’s military leadership had made, that is, to his mind, how it had ignored or misunderstood Schlieffen’s teachings.

Permanent War

The General Staff’s initial prosecution of the war had been intended to end the war operationally before it turned into a contest of attrition. If the Schlieffen-inspired plan did not pan out, a war of attrition ending in Germany’s defeat became a possibility. According to the strategic logic of the German war plan, the debacle on the Marne made the war impossible to

70. Letter to Helene, Dec. 10, 1914, letter, N46/ 31, fol. 97; quote reprinted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 529.

win on the General Staff's terms. During the rest of 1914, Groener came to appreciate how the war was devolving into a contest of attrition, but he was unable to follow the logic of Schlieffen's strategic thought and conclude that continuing the current offensive was pointless. The previous section shows the broad cultural and operational logic that helped him to believe that continuing to pursue victory still made sense; however, a deeper mental process also contributed to his determination to stay the course.

Psychologist Lawrence LeShan observes that human constructions of reality change according to context. War often entails a shift from conventional sensory perception of our environment to mythic perception in which a world with nuances becomes one with only two poles and no middle ground: on one hand, victory and the consequent triumph of good over evil, on the other hand, defeat and the destruction of one's nation, culture, way of life.⁷¹ Memories of the Second World War illustrate the mythic mode of perception. It is not difficult for Americans born after that conflict to see it as a "good war," a war against absolute evil, in which it is easy to justify or at least overlook the United States' deliberate targeting of civilians with firebomb and nuclear attacks. It is more difficult to understand the myths

71. Lawrence LeShan, *The Psychology of War: Comprehending its Mystique and its Madness* (1992; New York: Helios Press, 2002), 33–69.

that sustained the participants of the First World War, for we tend to remember that war as utterly senseless. The historiography, however, is coming to recognize that many contemporaries attributed significant purpose to the war. It seemed to offer opportunities for patriotic service and self-sacrifice in place of the petty concerns of everyday life in peacetime. It gave life meaning. It was a crusade for one's "culture" (Germany) or "civilization" (France) in a titanic all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy who appeared guilty of the worst deceit and atrocities.⁷²

From its beginning, Groener thought of the war in almost messianic terms. Its purpose was not simply to solve Germany's current security dilemma. Nothing less than "the future of the German people" was at stake.⁷³ The war was no diplomatic or political choice for him, no "calculated risk."⁷⁴ It was "an historical necessity." The Kaiser might complain about the "unprecedented perfidy of his relatives" that brought about the war, but Groener knew "the circumstances" were "stronger than even the word of

72. Mythic perception of war in general: Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002); LeShan, *Psychology of War*. The First World War: Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14–18*, 91–171; Strachan, *First World War* (2001), 1:103–62. See also Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914–1930* (Oxford: Berg, 1998); John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 227–325.

73. Diary, Aug. 21, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 2.

74. This term is from Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's Calculated Risk, July 1914," *Central European History* 2.1 (1969): 48–76.

honor of monarchs.”⁷⁵ Images of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 contributed to his mythic perception of the current war. It was no accident that he mentioned the elder Moltke on August 17th and remarked on the proximity of Sedan on August 24th, when he was forecasting “three Schlieffen beatings.”⁷⁶ On August 27th he mentioned the “underhanded shooting” of which the German army accused Belgian civilians. This image recalled the language that veterans of the 1870–71 War had used to describe French partisans. So did the punishment. “Yesterday in Louvain a larger number of residents who had been found with weapons and bullets were immediately shot on the marketplace, including two priests—these last.”⁷⁷ On October 2nd he visited Reims, where he believed his father had been quartered in 1870.⁷⁸ His mythic perception of the war informed his attitude towards the Russians and English as well. He told his wife on November 7th that she should advise an unmarried female acquaintance of theirs, apparently a teacher of some sort, to drop the Tolstoy readings, because there were “enough German authors” for her children.⁷⁹ As

75. Diary, Oct. 30, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 60, reprinted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 527.

76. Letter to Helene, Aug. 17, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 5–6; diary, Aug. 24, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 7–8.

77. Diary, Aug. 27, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 13. See Stoneman, “Bavarian Army and French Civilians”; Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 1914.

78. Letter to Helene, Oct. 2, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 44.

79. Letter to Helene, Nov. 7, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 73. See Gerd Koenen, *Der*

mentioned above, he also empathized with his adolescent daughter's unwillingness to learn the enemies' languages at school.⁸⁰ In short, he believed Germany was engaged in an epic struggle that left it no alternative but to keep fighting. Only in this context does the following statement to his wife on November 23rd make sense: "It is quite good that Christmas at home is being celebrated very militarily, for the future of Germany demands many new soldiers!"⁸¹ The home front was showing the kind of stoicism it would need to get through the still long and bloody struggle ahead.

In the same letter, Groener adjusted his expectations in a further important, but limited way. "In the present war it will hardly be possible to arrive at a 100-year peace. After the war we will have to rebuild."⁸² Since a lasting peace was not going to be achieved by the present war, Groener began to think about the next war, which to his mind was inevitable, just as the present war had been. It did not occur to him, however, that war might not achieve the giant task he set out for it: a near permanent peace on the

Russland-Komplex: Die Deutschen und der Osten, 1900–1945 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005).

80. Letter to Helene, Nov. 16, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 81. Matthew Stibbe, *German Anglophobia and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

81. Letter to Helene, Nov. 23, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fol. 86.

82. Ibid, fol. 86.

basis of lasting fear of German military might. Groener told Falkenhayn about his ideas for the future of Belgium at Christmas Eve dinner:

Military occupation, appropriation by the [German] Empire of its transportation infrastructure, especially the rail and waterways, limited constitution, no universal suffrage, no conscription either, only police troops—in other words, occupation for the foreseeable future with financial exploitation of transportation for the Imperial budget as partial compensation for the war.⁸³

Groener had more in mind than merely helping the Kaiserreich recover some of the costs of the war. Following the same logic that had led the elder Moltke to demand Alsace-Lorraine in the 1870–71 war as an area for military deployment, Groener wanted to have Belgium available for this purpose. On New Year's Eve he wrote to his wife that the German people had to begin thinking about preparing for a new war as soon as the current one was over.

As far as the railroads are concerned, I have already begun, and am having new railways and second tracks built for a better connection with the Belgian railway network. The nice thing about war, is that one can order such a thing without much paperwork, whereas in peacetime one needs seven years and much ink in order to get one new bridge over the Rhine.⁸⁴

This was war without end, not a viable long-term security policy.

83. Diary, Dec. 24, 1914, BA-MA, N46/22, fols. 94–95; reprinted in the appendix of Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 529.

84. Letter to Helene, Dec. 31, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 113–14; reprinted in the appendix of Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 529. For the antebellum context of these remarks, see Mitchell, *Great Train Race*.

Groener made these remarks at a time when his wife and daughter had been unable to get a Christmas tree, the result of a seemingly harmless shortage that was symptomatic of much more serious weaknesses emerging in the German war economy. Groener was aware of these problems.⁸⁵ How he expected to impose a draconian peace on Belgium was a mystery, but he seems to have felt that Germany was dealing from a position of military strength, even if it could not impose a solution on its enemies that lasted 100 years. “The fortune that we have had thus far will remain true to us.”⁸⁶ The mythic perception of war that he shared with his comrades, countrymen, and enemies made stopping the war unthinkable until one or both sides was militarily and materially exhausted.

85. Letter to Helene, Dec. 28, 1914, BA-MA, N46/ 31, fols. 111–12; Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 99–100. See Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

86. Letter to Helene, Dec. 31, 1914, BA-MA, N46/31, fols. 113–14; reprinted in the appendix of Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 529.

Groener went to war in 1914 expecting Germany to defeat France and Britain on the battlefield in a series of military operations that would achieve their main object in a matter of weeks or months, after which Germany could turn most of its forces against Russia. The initial weeks of the western campaign seemed to deliver what he had expected, and then some, until German forces had to halt their offensive on the Marne and regroup in early September. It then became clear that German forces had only succeeded in pushing back their western enemies, not killing or capturing them in significant enough numbers to render them operationally meaningless. This major setback meant the end of the Schlieffen-inspired war plan, but Groener refused to follow its strategic logic and acknowledge that Germany was fighting a war of attrition that it was unlikely to win.

Continuing the war made sense to Groener on at least three different levels. First, accepting the difficulty of the new tactical situation was one thing. Concluding that defeat was inevitable was quite another. The central place that the imperative to succeed held in German military culture was a significant factor in helping Groener to find purpose in continuing the war against the logic of Schlieffen's teachings. Indeed, he never seems to have noticed the contradiction. Second, apparent opportunities to outflank or

break through enemy positions continued to present themselves, not only in the wide spaces of the east, but also in the west. The German military leadership's antebellum emphasis on operational and tactical knowhow at the expense of strategic vision had cultivated practices and habits of thought that thrived in such situations. Solving tactical and operational problems continued to predominate, while fundamental strategic analysis failed to establish a solid foothold in the military. In other words, there were so many trees to work with, that it was easy for the army's leadership to overlook the forest. Third, even where a keener appreciation of Germany's difficult strategic situation appeared, such as gradually happened to Groener during the last four months of 1914, a powerful mythic perception of the war made it all but impossible to do a rational ends-means calculation. Once a mythical consciousness predominated on both sides, the war would be difficult to stop before one or both sides became utterly exhausted and no longer capable of fighting.

Groener watched Germany's mobile operations in 1914 grind to a halt in the mud and trenches on the western front. He also witnessed how elusive decisive victories were in the more mobile eastern theater. Far from rattling at the foundations of the General Staff's paradigm of war, though, the decidedly indecisive campaigns of 1914 confirmed for Groener the

correctness of Schlieffen's teachings and the narrow paradigm they represented. Schlieffen, after all, had warned that never-ending trench warfare could set in. Hence he had worked to cultivate the kind of operational competence in General Staff officers that would enable them to fight decisive battles relatively quickly, before the worst-case scenario could occur. Far from disproving Schlieffen's teachings, the war in 1914 confirmed his greatness in Groener's eyes. Groener's antebellum training predisposed him to conclude that Germany did not fail on the Marne because of a faulty strategic and operational concept of war, but because of bad operational leadership. Hence, while he adjusted to the new strategic situation, he saw no reason to rethink his fundamental image of war. The war could drag on for years, but, he believed, this situation could have been avoided by smarter fighting at the war's outset. For him, the blood-soaked disappointments of 1914 were not a testament to the failure of his prewar training, but rather an object lesson in its enormous value.

5. Lessons of War

Groener's mythic perception of war sustained him for nearly four more years of conflict, despite the continuing stalemate, despite repeated increases in the number of Germany's enemies and active fronts, and despite clear existential threats to the country posed by severe shortages of food, coal, and manpower. Only when Germany was no longer able to hold the Western Front did Groener conclude that it had lost the war and the fighting had to stop. True to the all-or-nothing game that in his eyes was war, he had supported a struggle in which Germany lost its armies, officer corps, and monarchies, as well as large amounts of treasure and land.

Groener's wartime career paralleled the war's evolution from mobile campaigns into stalemate, attrition, and defeat.¹ As chief of the Railroad Section he oversaw the execution of the military travel plan that laid the

1. The best published account can be found not in his daughter's biography, Groener-Geyer, *General Groener: Soldat und Staatsmann*, but in his own memoirs, Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, whose healthily skeptical editor, Hiller, has supplemented with an appendix of telling selections from Groener's voluminous war diary and letters. Hiller also identifies the places in Groener's memoirs where the latter explicitly or silently quoted these sources but changed their wording. See also the dispute between Groener-Geyer and Hiller: Dorothea Groener-Geyer, "Die Odysee der Groener-Papiere," *Die Welt als Geschichte* 19.2 (1959): 75–95; Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen, "Zur 'Odysee der Groener-Papiere': Kritische Bemerkungen zu dem Aufsatz von Dorothea Groener-Geyer," *Die Welt als Geschichte* 19 (1959): 244–53.

groundwork for Germany's invasion of Belgium and France.² He witnessed the army's offensive grind to a halt on the Marne and never regain significant momentum.³ He oversaw countless redeployments via railroad as the army sought to unstick the war in the west and achieve crushing victories in the east.⁴ He ensured that supplies reached the armies and experienced how material and troop shortages prevented the army from generalizing local successes. He became involved in broader economic aspects of the war, first through the occupying army's exploitation of Belgium's resources, in 1916 and 1917 at the head of the newly formed War Office, which attempted to manage the German war economy's inadequate material and human resources.⁵ In 1918 as chief of staff of the Army Group Eichhorn, he participated in attempts to acquire grain from Ukraine.⁶ In the final days of the war, he replaced Erich Ludendorff as First General Quartermaster and guided the German army and officer corps through

2. Bucholz, *Prussian War Planning*; Reichsarchiv, *Das deutsche Feldeisenbahnwesen* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1928).

3. See Chapter 4.

4. Reichsarchiv, *Das deutsche Feldeisenbahnwesen*.

5. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*; Wilhelm Deist, ed., *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918*, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1970), 459–647.

6. Winfried Baumgart, "General Groener und die deutsche Besatzungspolitik in der Ukraine 1918," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 21 (1970); Peter Borowsky, *Deutsche Ukrainepolitik 1918 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Wirtschaftsfragen* (Lübeck: Matthiesen, 1970); Stephan von Velsen, "Die Ukraine und wir. Ein Rückblick auf die deutsche Okkupation," *Preussische Jahrbücher* 176 (1919): 260–66.

revolution and defeat into a new republic.⁷ With hindsight these military, political, economic, and administrative experiences might be expected to have taught him about the limits of Schlieffen's military teachings.

Nonetheless, after the war he became a vocal proponent of Schlieffen's operational thought. Why? What did Groener believe Schlieffen could teach a country that had fought and endured millions of deaths and painful material privations for over four years, not on a battlefield in a war of movement, but in trenches and underground bunkers, on factory floors and workshops, in mines and on farms, and in countless other areas of public and private life? How were Schlieffen's teachings relevant to Germany's "total war" experience?⁸

This chapter addresses this problem by analyzing Groener's postwar publications in two sections. The first one considers those aspects of his

7. Rakenius, *Wilhelm Groener*; Kluge, *Die deutsche Revolution*, 138–58; Guth, *Der Loyalitätskonflikt*; Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik*, 1341–1401.

8. On the term "total war" see, Roger Chickering, "Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept," in Boemeke et al., *Anticipating Total War*, 13–28. For an attempt to portray the experience of "total war" without simply resorting to its rhetoric, see Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*. See also Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds., *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1997); Boemeke et al., *Anticipating Total War*; Chickering and Förster, *Great War, Total War*; Chickering and Förster, eds., *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919–1939* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2003); Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937–1945* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2005).

interpretation that went beyond Schlieffen's operational thought to include Germany's material shortages and the problems these caused for both the fighting and home fronts. It centers on Groener's concern with Germany's fragmented leadership and administrative structures that were so inadequate to the enormous challenges they faced. This section includes brief consideration of Groener's tenure in the War Office, which informed his analysis. The second section turns to Groener's advocacy of the Schlieffen Plan, which for him was motivated by both the need to explain the past and the duty to prepare the country's armed forces for the future.

Fragmented Leadership Structures

Groener remained faithful to Schlieffen's ideas after the war, because they seemed to offer a powerful framework for understanding the entire war. The seriousness of his interpretive use of Schlieffen was underlined by the breadth of his grasp of other issues raised by the war, the more so as this understanding reflected extensive experience with both military operations and the war on the home front. Groener did not advocate Schlieffen's teachings despite his experiences on the home front, but because of them.

In a wider-ranging analysis than characterized his later publications, he wrote an extended, somewhat convoluted essay that the publishers of the

prestigious *Preussische Jahrbücher* brought out in 1920 as *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme* (The World War and its Problems).⁹ This journal was an interesting choice of venue, because historian and pundit Hans Delbrück had published it until 1919, and was presumably still close to it. In the Wilhelmine era, Delbrück had pursued a long debate in the press with General Staff officers about the nature of strategy, with Delbrück claiming that historically wars had been fought in one of two ways. One was through the decisive battles of annihilation that the General Staff advocated, but the other was through attrition. This assertion had represented a challenge to the German military, insofar as the civilian Professor Delbrück had encroached on military stomping grounds. Worse, Delbrück had used Frederick the Great's prosecution of the Seven Years' War as an example of a war of attrition. In officers' eyes, Delbrück had besmirched the reputation of a king whose achievements in war formed a central component of the German officer corps' mythology and self-concept.¹⁰ During the war itself,

9. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*. Besides as an individual publication, this essay also appeared in several parts in the journal between January and June 1920. Full citation of these parts and an English translation of two brief extracts relating solely to the Schlieffen Plan are available in Zuber, *German War Planning*, 289–90. According to Zuber, “Groener’s first essay is a long discourse on German foreign policy and society before 1914 as seen by the nationalist Right.” This characterization neither does the essay’s breadth and nuance justice nor does it acknowledge the diversity of nationalist political opinion in Germany at the time.

10. Sven Lange, *Hans Delbrück und der “Strategiestreit”: Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879–1914* (Freiburg i. Br.: Rombach, 1995); Bucholz, *Hans Delbrück*; Gordon A. Craig, “Delbrück: The Military Historian,” in Paret, *Makers of*

Delbrück frequently expressed loyal skepticism of the government's positions on strategy, war aims, and domestic morale and politics. To add insult to injury, he made up for the paucity of publicly available material by drawing on foreign sources—and not only from neutral countries. Besides occasional censorship, he once had to put up with public humiliation from the Kaiser.¹¹ Delbrück argued after the war that the German army had followed the wrong war plan in 1914. It should have marched east, not west. But Delbrück also argued that if the army marched west, it had no business stretching its forces thin from Switzerland to Belgium, as he believed Moltke's deployment plan, which Ludendorff had helped to author, prescribed. Schlieffen's plan had been better. Delbrück and Groener agreed about another fundamental point: Ludendorff had made a mess of the war as First General Quartermaster. His ill-advised spring 1918 offensive had weakened Germany's position on the western front so irreparably that a negotiated peace had been out of the question. Only surrender had been possible.¹²

Modern Strategy, 326–53.

11. Arden Bucholz, *Delbrück's Modern Military History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 26–33.

12. Hans Delbrück, *Ludendorffs Selbstporträt* (Berlin: Verlag für Politik und Wirtschaft, 1922), which is excerpted in Bucholz, *Delbrück's Modern Military History*, 180–92; Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 85–100; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 419–39; Groener, "Persönlichkeit und Strategie Ludendorffs," presentation at the Mittwochs-Gesellschaft, 1936, BA-MA, N46/75, 67–82; Groener, "Vortrag in der Mittwochs-gesellschaft

Groener's essay privileged Schlieffen's ideas, and it embedded them in a larger argument about the fragmented nature of Imperial Germany's political, military, and economic leadership structures and the resultant inconsistency of its policies. Reflecting his wartime experience in Berlin at the head of the War Office, this approach marked an important step forward in his concept of war. He had moved from narrow operational thinking to more comprehensive strategic thought. Paradoxically, this perspective reinforced his appreciation of Schlieffen's military exercises and war planning, which focused exclusively on the operational level of war.

Groener's analysis of Imperial Germany's fragmented leadership structures and inconsistent policies began with its antebellum foreign policy. He had not played a role in formulating this policy, but by 1920 he could appreciate the weaknesses of the policy-making structures that had given rise to it. After unification, Bismarck had cultivated good relations with Germany's eastern neighbor, Russia, and worked to isolate its recently defeated western neighbor, France, in order to maintain what Germany had gained through the 1870–71 war. After Bismarck left office, however, the young empire started to feel its oats.¹³ Its economic power grew, as did the

am 29. Juni 1938," BA-MA, N46/75, 131–54.

13. Groener's analysis was probably colored by the strong symbolic value that attached to Bismarck's name in German politics and culture: Richard Evan Frankel, *Bismarck's Shadow: The Cult of Leadership and the Transformation of the German Right*,

world-political ambitions of its people. Germany's statesmen pursued a policy that was alternately peaceful and bellicose. Even if they had pursued a consistently peaceful policy, Groener doubted whether a reasonable compromise could have been reached with England. Besides, to his mind war offered the most reliable way to achieve results in international relations. In any case, France and Russia formed an alliance, and England joined political forces with these countries. Adapting to politics the idiom Schlieffen used in his famous Cannae operational studies (1909–13), Groener wrote "The political Cannae concept was born, the unity of the political and operational concepts secured: political isolation, military pincer movement, cut off Germany from imports by sea, finally, if Germany could not be brought to its senses by milder means, capitulation of the German people." England followed a consistent policy of political and military encirclement, which also met the interests of her two continental underlings. Groener argued that Germany's civilian and military leadership should have countered this cohesive policy with a "bold, forward-looking" policy of its own. The only person with a coherent political and military solution to Germany's strategic dilemma had been Schlieffen, but his responsibilities and powers in peacetime had been limited. He had not been

1898–1945 (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Lothar Machtan, ed., *Bismarck und der deutsche National-Mythos* (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 1994).

able to influence foreign policy. “If Germany had been determined not to allow its freedom of development to be limited and not to shy away from battle, no matter how difficult,” then its political leadership should have chosen an appropriate military strategy. Groener wrote that Germany should have adopted Schlieffen’s operational plan and gone to war at a time of its own choosing, ideally right after Russia had been weakened by the Russo-Japanese War, so Germany could concentrate on its western neighbor.¹⁴

Groener did not blame Bernhard von Bülow (1900–9) or Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg (Chancellor, 1909–17) for failing to pursue such a course.¹⁵ Indeed, his inconsistent switching between the plural and singular of the state’s “helmsman” suggested not just carelessness in his prose, but uncertainty over which person or office had set Wilhelmine foreign policy, never mind coordinated it with the Kaiserreich’s many-headed military leadership structure.¹⁶ He observed that altogether more favorable

14. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 5–16, quotes 12–13, 11, 16, 13.

15. On German foreign policy in this period, see Klaus Hildebrand, *Deutsche Aussenpolitik 1871–1918* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1989); Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich: deutsche Aussenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler, 1871–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995). On the last two chancellors to serve the empire in peacetime: Katharine Anne Lerman, *The Chancellor as Courtier: Bernhard von Bülow and the Governance of Germany, 1900–1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

16. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 11.

circumstances had obtained for Frederick the Great and Napoleon I, who had each been

king, statesman, and commander [*Feldherr*] in one person. There is no doubt that in their cases the knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] of the statesman [had] transmitted to the genius of command those political goals that were to be achieved by force. Clashes between the opinions of the statesman and the commander about the use of this or that means of force [or] about the purpose of the war and when to move to peace could find their balance in one mind. Because this balance did not occur in Napoleon in the later period, but instead an obsession with glory gained the upper hand, defeat was the inevitable consequence.¹⁷

This last remark was surprising for a former General Staff officer who in August 1914 had spoken of dealing not only with the enemy, but also Germany's chancellor and his people in the foreign office. Perhaps it was a dig at Ludendorff. In any case, it should not be taken as unqualified adherence to the prescriptive Clausewitzian concept of war as policy by other means.¹⁸ He cited the officer-philosopher on this point, but he also recalled political disagreements between Bismarck and Moltke in 1870–71 with some sympathy for Moltke's side.¹⁹ "The soldier's way of thinking

17. Ibid, 33.

18. This prescription: Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds., *On War*, trans. Howard and Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Peter Paret, "Clausewitz," in Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 186–213. Cf. Gat, *History of Military Thought*, 158–256; John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

19. On this dispute, see Stig Förster, "The Prussian Triangle of Leadership in the Face of a People's War: A Reassessment of the Conflict between Bismarck and Moltke, 1870–71," in *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification*, ed. Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler (New York: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1997), 115–40.

demanded that what the sword has gained, the statesman's pen was not allowed to give up again. This view found new strength among the successors of Bismarck." But Groener also wrote that Bismarck's "authority had remained undisputed in military circles."²⁰ He allowed these ambiguous remarks to speak for themselves and did not pursue the thought further. The authority of civilian government and the soldier's right to keep what he had conquered remained in an uneasy, unexplained equilibrium.

According to Groener, Frederick's and Napoleon's enemies had relied on various forms of "war councils," that is, "*one* head" had been replaced by "a multiplicity." Groener wrote that this circumstance explained why "Frederick and Napoleon had been superior to their opponents from the beginning." Prussia used a different, but effective leadership structure in 1866 and 1870–71, a "committee" as Schlieffen called it.²¹

The king, who himself did not possess all of the characteristics of a statesman and commander, had with a surefire eye found two personalities who were capable of taking on the roles of statesman and commander. Luckily the opinions of both members of this committee rarely diverged. When it happened, such as in 1866 after Königgrätz and in 1870 outside of Paris, the King, with his wise understanding and tact, made the right decision.²²

20. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 33–34, quote 34. Cf. Schmid, *Der "Eiserne Kanzler" und die Generäle*.

21. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 33; original emphasis.

22. Ibid, 33.

Groener wrote that Schlieffen had doubted whether such a system would work in the future, not only because Germany lacked leaders of comparable ability, but because of the staggering increases in people, space, and deadly force involved. Groener admitted that Schlieffen had no answer to this problem, although he meant no reproach, because Schlieffen's peacetime portfolio had been so narrow. Moreover, Groener did not reject the notion of a committee outright. "In peacetime the decisive question about how the leadership of the people was to be set up in such a war was not examined more closely. We had at our disposal the model [*Vorbild*] of the committee of the last wars and Count Schlieffen's recipe for victory." Nothing was wrong with either of these two things, in Groener's opinion. The problem was that the necessary personalities were missing for the committee, and without them Schlieffen's "recipe" could not be followed correctly. "*One* mind, in which the genius of the the statesman, commander, and economic captain were united, was not found." Nor did Germany's leadership "hazard expanding the committee into a war cabinet, directorate, supreme council, or however else you want to call it"²³

Groener had not perceived the need for such a step in 1914, in part because he was not even a general at the time and had not yet learned how

23. Ibid, 34, original emphasis.

the highest levels of government functioned. Moreover, the situation had not seemed serious enough to call for the involvement of the General Staff, which had a war to fight, that is, operations to direct. When Undersecretary of Commerce Göppert could not get his own minister to do anything about regulating the distribution and consumption of wheat and rye, he turned to Supreme Headquarters. Groener, made a logical choice of address because of his previous involvement in questions of supply. Moreover, as Gerald Feldman points out, he enjoyed “enormous prestige” at this point, because of the successful mobilization and deployment in August 1914.²⁴ Colonel Groener passed the request for help on to the War Minister, and did nothing more about it, since it was not part of his portfolio.²⁵

A further effort to involve Supreme Headquarters in the regulation of food was made in the spring of 1916 with the creation of the War Food Office.²⁶ General Groener was assigned to this mixed civilian-military body under civilian leadership, but he kept his office as Chief of the Railroad

24. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 99. Feldman incorrectly calls Groener a general at this point, but this promotion did not come until June 1915. However, additions to the Groener papers in Freiburg, Germany confirm Feldman’s broad impression; they contain photograph and autograph requests Groener received after he became a general. Letters from Gymnasium Director Mapari, F. Waldeck, and Geheim Kommerzienrat Georg W. Bürenstein to Groener, June 6, July 9, and July 19, 1915, BA-MA, N46/R.

25. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 210; Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 99–100.

26. Ibid, 109–14.

Section, because that office gave him the wide-ranging powers he needed for all his duties.²⁷ He had to give up his position in the General Staff when he was appointed to head the brand new War Office in autumn 1916. His new powers sounded imposing. The independent Deputy Commanding Generals were subordinated to the Minister of War, General von Stein, for matters relating to the country's economic mobilization. Stein delegated this authority to Groener, who himself held the position of Deputy War Minister and became one of Prussia's representatives to the the *Bundesrat*, the upper body of the German representative body.²⁸ In Groener's eyes by 1920, however, these powers amounted only to a license to negotiate, cajole and sometimes berate. In his essay, "The World War and its Problems," he wrote that the Chief of the Field Railways had been "free from all restraints in his work." An earlier chief of the Railroad Section and later minister of Prussia's railways, Hermann von Budde, had implemented a legal framework that ensured that the Chief of the Field Railways would have

27. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 333–34; Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 110.

28. *Ibid.*, 192.

“dictatorial authority” in war.²⁹ The implication was that he could have used this kind of authority in the War Office.

Groener faced an impossible task, given Germany’s shortages in raw materials, food, and manpower. As a General Staff officer, however, he was accustomed to the notion that he could always succeed when the odds were stacked against him. It was no coincidence that the university-educated Kurt Riezler in the Foreign Office lumped him into the same pot with the First General Quartermaster in a diary entry on January 25, 1917: “The capable ones [*Tüchtigen*] who have come up in the war such as Ludendorff [and] Groener, blatant lack of education and cultivation [*krasseste Unbildung*] . . . in the end really an American type—narrowness.”³⁰ Riezler’s description suggested that both Groener and Ludendorff drew on habits from their tenures in the peacetime General Staff, above all else actionism. In German military thought, it was better to risk doing the wrong thing than do nothing at all.³¹ Feldman concludes that the War Office’s activities

29. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 36; Hermann von Budde, *Hermann v. Budde: Staatsminister und Minister der öffentlichen Arbeiten: Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungsblätter gesammelt und niedergeschrieben von seinem treuesten Freunde und Lebenskameraden* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1916).

30. Kurt Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1972), 401–2.

31. Hull uses the term “actionism” to describe the officer corps’ “exaggerated drive for action,” a theme that runs throughout her book. Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 2–3. A Wilhelmine saying reminded officers that it was better to err than not act: “*Unterlassung belastet mehr als ein Fehlgreifen in der Wahl der Mittel.*” Groener, “Besprechung der Aufgaben aus dem Gebiet des Etappenwesens und Feldverpflegungsdienstes 1906,” BA-

were not only ineffective, but downright counterproductive. Supreme Headquarters had mandated the so-called Hindenburg Plan, whose arbitrary goals and ruthless, but often senseless centralization schemes wasted scarce resources.³² True to his General Staff ethos of leadership making all the difference, Groener concentrated on a different problem—the diffuse and overlapping nature of power and responsibility in the Wilhelmine state.

Groener wrote that there had been too many official positions whose occupants enjoyed direct access to the Kaiser, and who “according to good old tradition” jealously guarded this privilege.³³ The number of people with this right increased dramatically when mobilization was declared. At that moment, the 1851 Prussian Law of Siege took effect. It gave far-reaching powers to twenty-four Deputy Corps Commanders, whose jurisdictions did not correspond to Germany’s political boundaries.³⁴ The “many-headed organism” that embodied the state’s leadership often had to appeal to the Kaiser for a decision. Since, however, the material was too vast and complicated for a single individual to master, the monarch often sided with

MA, N46/103, fol. 31.

32. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 266–73.

33. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 34–35, quotes 35.

34. Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik*, xxxi, xxxix, 1403–7, and attached map; Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 27–33.

whoever was able to make his case most emphatically at the moment. According to Groener, people also promoted their own interests and undermined the Kaiser's position by appealing to the opinions of political parties and commercial associations. Germany's ineffective wartime leadership structure led to questions about changing the country's constitutional order to a parliamentary system or a dictatorship, but a mind capable of filling the latter position was never found, and the path of responsible parliamentary government was not followed until defeat was imminent.

Till then one tinkered with the usual means of the old system of government. One created new senior positions, shifted responsibilities, and achieved not a strengthening and acceleration of the machine of government but instead its weakening due to the increase in the sources of friction and the impediment of quick decisions.³⁵

The Kaiserreich's federal structure introduced further sources of friction into the business of government, and things only got worse as the state's responsibilities grew and the areas and peoples it controlled expanded.

After making this observation, Groener jumped to a thought with the potential to undermine his firm belief in the power of Schlieffen's operational thought.

35. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 35. See also Chickering, "Imperial Germany at War," 32–35; Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*.

Outstanding, farsighted personalities with a political and economic eye and unfaltering courage of responsibility were needed almost more in the committee than the military commander, because the fight was not about provinces and limited political goals; it was about the world market and the world economic power position of the German people.

But he immediately restored military leadership to a position of equality in his war-winning triad: “That is why military, political, and economic leadership were completely inseparable.” Everyone in the committee had to be informed by the same idea, “the recognition that the maintenance of Germany in its world economic relationships was the political goal of the war.”³⁶ Groener was back in an intellectual space where Schlieffen’s operational concept for a rapid offensive in the west made sense, and where he could reject the notion that Britain could have been kept out of the war if Germany had not violated Belgian neutrality. War with England was inevitable, he argued, and the path to victory without sinking into a dangerous contest of attrition lay through Belgium.³⁷

Groener returned to economic aspects of the war frequently in his text, for food and material shortages had had a major impact on the war’s

36. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 36. Further statements that the war’s ultimate purpose was a fight between Germany and England for global economic position: Wilhelm Groener, “Krieg und Weltwirtschaft,” *Weltwirtschaft* 10 (1920), 33; Wilhelm Groener, *Die Eisenbahn als Faktor der Politik: Vortrag, gehalten in der Hochschule für Politik, Berlin* (Verlag von Ferdinand Enke in Stuttgart, 1921), 3; Wilhelm Groener, “Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft für die Strategie,” *Weltwirtschaft* 15 (1927).

37. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 37–38.

outcome, and they had been made worse by ineffective leadership. A central theme for him was the absence of economic preparation prior to the war and insufficient economic mobilization once the war had begun. These failures resulted from a deficit of imagination, a lack of coordination among different government policy-making bodies, and insufficient political will to raise the necessary funds.³⁸ All economic and military planning should have reckoned with an economic blockade by England, “for it is the first requirement of war preparatory measures to base them on the most unfavorable situation and not count on uncertain factors, which imports by sea were.”³⁹ Once the war had begun and England had cut off Germany’s foreign trade, Germany should have taken immediate measures to ensure that the worst effects of economic shortages were postponed for as long as possible. Germany’s ability to fight the war depended on the physical well-being and morale of its people, but its leadership clung to “the illusion of an early victory,” and so “the first and second war years were dedicated to living from one day to the next [*das Indentaghineinleben*].”⁴⁰ If Groener meant to apportion blame to anyone specific, he would have had to include himself. But he seems to

38. Ibid, 50–55.

39. Ibid, 51–52, quote 52; mistaken antebellum German assumptions about the possibility of a British blockade, 57–58.

40. Ibid, 58.

have been more interested in teaching his educated, politically interested readers about Germany's mistakes.

When he got to the problem of war profits, however, he had an axe to grind, for Ludendorff had fired him over the issue. Groener believed excessive war profits lay at the heart of Germany's wartime inflation, labor disputes, fissures between the field army and home-front, and decline in the country's willingness to endure further sacrifices. High profits were militarily acceptable in the early months of the war, when they perhaps promoted the timely delivery of war materials needed to achieve a rapid victory. As the war dragged on, however, inordinately high profits began to undermine morale and weaken Germany's cohesion and ability to fight.

The dangers to the popular morale [*Moralität des Volkes*] increased in the war, because the war profits of the one stood in stark contrast to the self-sacrifice [*Opfertod*] of the other. On one side grew avarice and a ruthless drive to earn money; honesty, loyalty, and belief tottered. On the other side a jealous desire to avoid self-sacrifice mushroomed. Given the length of the war, the devil lurking in this psychological antagonism had to seize hold of the people's soul. The loss of martial [*kriegerisch*] spirit and inner robustness meant more than lost battles.⁴¹

The state did nothing to reign in war profits or reclaim them through taxes.

Meanwhile, workers used the situation to acquire higher wages; prices increased dramatically; and the state's efforts to regulate the prices and

41. Ibid, 61.

availability of food and other essential consumer goods did little more than encourage “hoarders and black marketeers.” These circumstances threatened to bring about the “downfall of the martial spirit and undermine the foundations of the state.”⁴²

Groener linked the problem of war profits to the decay of morale in the army and Germany’s consequent revolution and defeat.

Egoism had gained the upper hand over love of the fatherland. Reclaiming men [for factory work] became the the cancer of the army. The antagonism between the army and homeland, between self-sacrifice and money-making, between doing without and savoring, [and] between rich and poor grew ever deeper. The poison of corrosion had penetrated the blood vessels of people and army. Interactions between the two could not be prevented, because they formed *one* living body, which as a consequence of undernourishment was no longer capable of producing antidotes in its own bloodstream.

Conditions grew ripe for “the resumption of class struggle,” which at the beginning of the war “had been interrupted by a fragile Burgfrieden” as all parliamentary parties rallied to support the war. With the resumption of class conflict, “the old social and political antagonisms” also sharpened. “The domestic struggle between the monarchical principle and popular sovereignty could no longer be stopped, because the government did not seem capable of bringing about peace. Thoughts of peace increasingly drove away the martial spirit and took control of the mass psyche.” Antagonism

42. Ibid, 61–62, quotes 62.

also grew between soldiers and their officers. Collapse was imminent, unless the monarchy decided to form an alliance with Germany's workers, which it did not.⁴³ Implicitly at least, Groener was defending himself against monarchists' charges of treason for his role in the Kaiser's abdication. With this analysis, Groener was also setting himself apart from such radical right-wing General Staff officers as Ludendorff and Bauer. Groener believed that a failure of political, economic, and military leadership had led Germany to the brink of ruin, not a conspiracy of Jews and Socialists who had allegedly stabbed a victorious army in the back. His Schlieffen advocacy also occurred in this context. Bauer, on the other hand, was close to industry and felt that Groener's conciliatory approach to workers emboldened them—especially with respect to the *Hilfsdienstgesetz*, a law whose original purpose had been to ameliorate Germany's manpower shortage by subjecting workers to government and military controls, but which also gave them representation in factory councils.⁴⁴

43. Ibid, 62–63. See also “Denkschrift über die Notwendigkeit eines staatlichen Eingriffs zur Regelung der Unternehmergewinne und Arbeiterlöhne,” 12 July 1914, reprinted in Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 521–25, and Richard Merton, *Erinnerungswertes aus meinem Leben, das über das Persönliche hinausgeht* (Frankfurt a. M.: Knapp, 1955), 29–36. Foundational work on these issues: Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*; Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1987); Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik*.

44. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 197–249; Bauer, *Der grosse Krieg*, 122–24; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 328–73.

Groener wrote that Supreme Headquarters had pursued most German operations from a “military” standpoint and some from a political standpoint. In two cases, however, economic requirements had informed operational decisions. The first example was in 1915 and involved Serbia, the defeat of which was supposed to open a path to Turkey. The second was in 1918, when Germany seized control of Ukraine, whose grain was supposed to help Germany and Austria-Hungary. Groener argued that economic considerations should have informed German operations from the beginning of the war, as soon as England had imposed its blockade. Because the “existence of the nation” depended on overseas commerce, Germany should have conducted its operations so as to link up with the world economy. “The Schlieffen Plan did this perfectly [*in vollkommenster Weise*].” It sought to defeat France rapidly and to break through the encirclement of Germany in its strongest and most important place. This quick defeat would have made England’s continued participation in the land war impossible. And once France was forced to accept peace, Italy would be unlikely to want to enter the war. “Italy and Spain then formed for us the intermediate bodies to world trade.”⁴⁵

45. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 64–65.

When this plan for the west failed in 1914, Germany had to turn to the east. Its aim had to be to throw Russia out of the war and reestablish economic links to the “Russian-Asian economic area.” Instead, however, the German army conquered territories in the east and tried to gain economic value from them. These accomplishments were not sufficient. Germany needed to establish links to the world economy, not expand its rudimentarily autarkic position in central and eastern Europe. When Germany finally knocked Russia out of the war, the hoped-for “economic breakthrough” remained a chimera. Germany still could not trade with Russia and thereby link up with the world economy, because Russia’s new Bolshevik leaders set about dismantling the Russian economy.⁴⁶

Groener’s analysis covered ground that went far beyond his General Staff training, but he always brought it back to Schlieffen. His usual economic argument was that the long war and consequent economic hardships and domestic social and political antagonisms could have been avoided, had Germany’s military leadership remained true to the spirit of Schlieffen’s plan and achieved victory in a reasonably short period of time.⁴⁷ Groener gave this argument a new twist when he identified a structural

46. Ibid, 65–66.

47. For example, Wilhelm Groener, “Zum Todestag des Generalfeldmarschalls Graf Schlieffen (4. Januar),” *Deutsche Revue* 45.1 (1920), 4–5.

unity behind Germany's need to break out of its economic encirclement and Schlieffen's operational plan.

He emphasized Schlieffen not simply because he felt that Schlieffen's plan and teachings embraced the economic dimensions of war in a way that no one else's had. In Groener's eyes, this favorable circumstance was evidence of something larger. Schlieffen was a rare breed of man: the born military commander (*Feldherr*), whose innate genius and talents could have overcome the myriad of other leadership weaknesses with which the Kaiserreich had been beset.⁴⁸ Groener's attitude towards Schlieffen was consistent with the central role that great men played in the history books of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Germany, whose educational system and public culture emphasized history.⁴⁹ In 1927 he wrote, "Great men stand at the turning points of history."⁵⁰ This understanding of the historical role of the individual informed an article he published in 1928 about Hans Delbrück, whom he quoted thus: "World history is by no means a process of nature. First the creative genius of a great personality shapes it

48. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 16–18; Groener, "Krieg und Weltwirtschaft," 33.

49. Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. ed. (1968; Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Geschichtskultur und Wissenschaft* (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990).

50. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 7.

from the available material.”⁵¹ Schlieffen was of this caliber.⁵² In a short article in 1920 on linkages between the war and the world economy, Groener wrote,

From the beginning, the imagination of statesman and commander created a false image of the coming development. Mistakes and self-deception were the consequence. There was only one real statesman and commander after Bismarck and Moltke [the Elder], Field Marshall Count Schlieffen, because he saw things as they were and with a creative imagination foresaw the coming development. He also did not neglect to draw the consequences and show the path to victory.⁵³

Schlieffen Plan Redux

Groener published a short article at the beginning of 1920 to honor Schlieffen’s ideas on the seventh anniversary of the Field Marshalls’ death.⁵⁴ The article appeared in the *Deutsche Revue*, the same journal in which Schlieffen had published his famous “*Krieg der Gegenwart*” (War Today) essay in 1909.⁵⁵ At the end of it, Groener wrote,

Whichever problems from the past war are taken up, they all lead back to the single problem, whose successful solution Count

51. Groener, “Delbrück und die Kriegswissenschaften,” in *Am Webstuhl der Zeit: Eine Erinnerungsgabe Hans Delbrück*, ed. Emil Daniels and Paul Rühlmann (Berlin: R. Hobbing, 1928), 39.

52. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 1–7.

53. Groener, “Krieg und Weltwirtschaft,” 33. See also Groener, “Zum Todestag.”

54. Ibid.

55. Reprinted in Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:11–22; available in English in Foley, *Schlieffen’s Military Writings*, 194–205.

Schlieffen had guaranteed [*verbürgen*] in his plan: the quickest, most thorough defeat of France in the only possible way. That things turned out differently cannot be blamed on the deceased Schlieffen. Because we did not follow his instructions in 1914, we got involved in attritional strategy, despite all our army's colossal efforts.⁵⁶

On his last point Groener quoted Schlieffen's famous phrase: "A strategy of attrition cannot be pursued, when the maintenance of millions requires the expenditure of billions." And further, "such wars are . . . impossible in a time when the existence of the nation is based on the uninterrupted progress of trade and industry." "A rapid decision" was necessary in order to "get the machine running again that had been brought to a standstill."⁵⁷

Groener reacted to these prescient remarks with words that amounted to an admonishment to his contemporaries: "We have every reason to commemorate Count Schlieffen on the anniversary of his death."⁵⁸

Whether or not Groener really believed that Schlieffen's ideas should have "guaranteed" victory, his other claims can be taken at face value. He had analyzed a myriad of different problems surrounding the war, including operations, tactics, technology, politics, domestic and international economic factors, and, above all else, leadership structures and the decisions they

56. Groener, "Zum Todestag," 4.

57. Ibid, 4–5; see Schlieffen, "Der Krieg der Gegenwart," Schlieffen, *Dienstschriften des Chefs des Generalstabes der Armee Generalfeldmarschalls Graf von Schlieffen*, 2 vols. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1937), 17.

58. Groener, "Zum Todestag," 5.

produced.⁵⁹ When he wrote that all problems of the Great War led back to Germany's failure to follow Schlieffen's teachings, he meant it.

But what "plan" was Groener thinking about? What "instructions" did he mean? Chapter 3 shows that there were discrepancies between, on one side, Schlieffen's pre-retirement teachings and Groener's antebellum image of war, and, on the other side, the stereotypes of Schlieffen's thought in the historiography, which stemmed from the articles Schlieffen wrote in retirement and the postwar testimony of former General Staff officers, including Groener.

While Groener began referring to the Schlieffen Plan as early as mid-September 1914, he did not appear at that point to have studied the 1905 memorandum itself, certainly not closely.⁶⁰ He did not yet refer to a specific memorandum of Schlieffen's, but rather to Schlieffen's intentions, of which he had formed a picture from his participation in General Staff exercises and his work on deployment plans in the Railroad Section. An early postwar document shows that Groener was aware of the memorandum no later than

59. See esp. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*. Groener's increased appreciation of the broad linkages between war and society was also evidenced by the esteem in which he held Hans Delbrück (Groener, "Delbrück und die Kriegswissenschaften") as well as his membership in the Mittwochs-Gesellschaft in the 1930s; Klaus Scholder, ed., *Die Mittwochs-Gesellschaft: Protokolle aus dem geistigen Deutschland 1932 bis 1944* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1982); BA-MA N46/75, 60, 63.

60. Diary, BA-MA, N46/22, fol. 29. See also Chapter 4 above.

1919. Evaluating a now missing account of German war planning for Hermann Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim of the Reichsarchiv that appears to have contained excerpts from Schlieffen's famous memorandum, Groener wrote, "When you read Schlieffen's 1905 *Denkschrift*, it's enough to make you cry out of rage and shame over our stupidity in 1914." He believed that Germany's military leaders need only have put the memorandum in their pockets and taken it with them to war.⁶¹ If Groener had read the whole memorandum by this point, he was still not entirely clear about the details of the operations it proposed.⁶² Furthermore, his published characterizations of the Schlieffen Plan in 1920 showed discrepancies with Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum that disappeared from his characterizations after 1925, when he began corresponding with Wilhelm Hahnke, son-in-law and former adjutant to Schlieffen, who with his wife had made Schlieffen's military papers available to Groener for his major book on the Schlieffen Plan.⁶³

61. BA-MA, N46/41, quoted in Zuber, *German War Planning*, 253.

62. Zuber is wrong about Schlieffen and Groener on many points, because of his refusal to consider the wider context of the documents he analyzes; nonetheless, he is right about the apparently limited extent of Groener's understanding of Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum in 1919. See *ibid.*, 245.

63. Letters from Hahnke to Groener, BA-MA, N46/38; Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, ix.

In 1920 Groener wrote, “When Schlieffen died in 1913, he left behind as [his] legacy [*Vermächtnis*] the secret of victory in a three-front [*sic*] war.”⁶⁴ Was “three” a typesetter’s error? In another piece from the same year he spoke of a two-front war, with which the contemporary discourse occupied itself.⁶⁵ Whether two or three fronts, Groener’s characterization represented an important departure from his prewar expectations and wartime experience in a significant way. While he had long believed that Schlieffen possessed special insight into the nature of modern war, he now wrote about Schlieffen’s plan as if it were infallible. This was the hagiographic language that made Schlieffen’s operational arguments so difficult for later generations of historians to accept, for nothing in war is foolproof.

“Simple and clear was the operational concept in which the secret of victory lay hidden: quickest, greatest military decision against our strongest enemy in the west. Mighty, strategic Cannae!”⁶⁶ “Strongest enemy” referred to France, although England had rapidly come to overshadow it in Groener’s mind during the war. “Cannae” stemmed from the like-named operational

64. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 16.

65. Groener, “Zum Todestag,” 2.

66. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 18.

studies that Schlieffen had published before the war.⁶⁷ Schlieffen had meant a double envelopment on the battlefield, but Groener's meaning was less clear. As mentioned above, he had referred to Britain's apparent diplomatic encirclement of Germany before the war as "political Cannae."⁶⁸ Turning to the war itself, he wrote, England had by no means prosecuted a war of attrition against Germany. Rather, it had taken Schlieffen's operational Cannae concept to its logical extreme. "In this maximum intensification, the Cannae concept meant the encirclement of all Germany with the operational [*sic*] goal of the complete capitulation of the German people." But then he wrote, "Precisely while this was the danger . . . , Schlieffen [had] warned against the faintest thought that could lead to a strategy of attrition."⁶⁹ Groener jumped from rejecting use of the term "attrition" to characterize the Allies' strategy to using the term to describe what actually happened to Germany. His inconsistent terminology created a minefield for the literally-minded reader. His seemingly simplistic description of a "Cannae" in the west did not represent a rejection of the more nuanced understanding of operations he had held before and during the war.

67. Reprinted in Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:25–266; selections in English in Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, 208–18.

68. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 12.

69. *Ibid.*, 26.

“Cannae” was a metaphor, not a prescription for a single battle that defeated France at one go. Cannae described the desired outcome of the sum total of operations against France. It was the *Gesamtschlacht*, or, in Groener’s idiom, “Schlieffen’s military symphony [*Kriegssymphonie*].”⁷⁰ Groener used similar artistic license when he described a turning movement involving many hundreds of thousands of men with a reference to Frederician tactics.⁷¹ He described the Schlieffen Plan in simplified terms for the readers of the *Preussische Jahrbücher* thus:

Left flank restrained and soundly anchored on the Mosel position Metz–Diedenhofen with the flank bent backwards. Right wing in a powerful *battalion carré*,* direction of march via Brussels towards Abbéville–Amiens. From the sea to the Mosel [*sic*], pivot left and march—in the Frederician manner—under the sounds of the parade into Paris. Then further across the Seine, strong enough not only to cut off Paris from the West, but also to continue the operation against the flank and the back of the French army, whether towards Orléans or Le Mans. If on the way the battalion carré bumps into English who have landed on the coast of Flanders or France, the turn left makes a temporary halt; the English are beaten and rendered harmless; then the march is continued. To be certain of having the necessary strength for all tasks of the right wing, all rifles and canons, all men, whether young or old, that the homeland can lay its hands on, will be sent there. If the French meanwhile invade Alsace and Lorraine, even cross the upper Rhine and

70. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 66, 81.

71. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 18.

* Literally, “battalion square,” Napoleon had used this term to refer to his method of marching his corps along separate roads about a day’s march from one another. Citino, *German Way of War*, 108. Groener was referring to the need for both breadth and depth on the German right wing.

threaten South Germany, so much the better for us; then they are removing themselves from *the* battlefield, where the decision lies.⁷²

This outline of his early Schlieffen Plan interpretation comported with accounts of the plan that have been since published, although the channel coast assumed a position that it had not possessed in Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum or Germany's initial war plan in 1914. Schlieffen had written that the German right wing would have to march "on Amiens or even on Abbéville" in the event that French forces defeated in Belgium or Northern France managed to establish a position behind the Somme. "However, this is very unlikely."⁷³ Operations towards the sea in the fall of 1914 might have influenced Groener's account, but there was also the problem of England, which Groener appreciated as early as September 1914. In his *Deutsche Revue* article, Groener defended the army officer corps against a charge Tirpitz had made to the effect that army officers had not properly understood the significance of England as an enemy. Not so, Groener argued.

The quintessence of the Schlieffen operational plan involved setting the bulk of the German army against the left flank and rear of the French army in such a way that the outflanking movement was achieved with the strongest forces, and a German superiority was certain on the decisive battlefields of Northern France, whether on the lower Somme or the upper Seine.

72. Groener, *Der Weltkrieg und seine Probleme*, 18, original emphasis.

73. Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, 168; Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, 152.

Within the context of this plan, Groener argued, “The path to the decisive battlefield led along the coast.” In other words, one requirement of the Schlieffen Plan, “whose simplicity, consistency, and daring” were “equally admirable,” was to gain control of the “French channel coast” and to drive “a powerful wedge” between France and England, so that the latter could not come to the former’s rescue.⁷⁴ If Groener had not meant to write about a three-front war, his characterization of the Schlieffen Plan in 1920 was more expansive than his later accounts, which focused on defeating French and possibly British troops in the field, not establishing a strategic troop presence on the channel coast. Indeed, such a presence would have been at odds with the requirement for a strong right wing with which to envelop French forces, the more so since the German right wing would already have lost considerable strength during the operations across Belgium and into northern France.⁷⁵

Groener’s mature Schlieffen Plan interpretation first appeared in 1925, and he developed it most fully in *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen* (The Testament of Count Schlieffen) (1927). Although this book was

74. Groener, “Zum Todestag,” quotes 2–3. See Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919), 2:6–7.

75. In his memorandum Schlieffen rejected a covering force for British landings and warned about the forces that the invasion of Belgium and northern France would consume. Foley, *Schlieffen’s Military Writings*, 169; Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, 153–54.

published by Germany's preeminent military press, E. S. Mittler, and was intended for an audience knowledgeable in the assumptions and idiom of German operational thought, Groener continued to use the phrase "secret of victory," for the book was part of a larger cultural project among General Staff officers to promote Schlieffen as they saw him—larger than life.⁷⁶ Incongruous with the notion that a "recipe for victory" existed, but consistent with Schlieffen's image as a brilliant commander, was a stock assumption from the Kaiserreich that Groener also rehearsed: it was impossible to develop a "doctrine" or "theory" (*Lehre*) for fighting wars. Schlieffen himself had understood this fact of life.⁷⁷ As adamant as Groener was on this last point, however, he concluded his book with a chapter called "The Basic Laws of War." Admittedly, he only identified two. The first was that one should attempt to destroy an enemy by attacking its flanks and rear. The second read, "The basic law of operating on an inner line is clear. The weaker one tries to defeat a divided enemy."⁷⁸ Groener meant that one maneuvered one's troops to achieve local superiority. The Schlieffen Plan comported with these "basic laws" and the specific strategic situation at hand: a war on two fronts against a numerically superior enemy.

76. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 4, 6.

77. Ibid, 11–13, 237–41.

78. Ibid, 237–244, quote 240.

How did Groener understand this “plan” or “testament” in 1927? In the book’s first chapter, which shared its title, he wrote that Schlieffen’s “testament” to the German people could be found in his “War Today” essay (1909) and his “Cannae” studies (1909–13), but later in his book he referred to the December 1905 memorandum as Schlieffen’s “testament.”⁷⁹ This typical inconsistency did not matter to Groener, for he was writing about a broad, but clear and consistent operational concept that Schlieffen had laid out in his articles, memorandum, and other military writings.

According to Groener, Schlieffen had used General Staff exercises and war games to counter German commanders’ bad habit of massing together before the enemy wherever they found him. The result of such behavior in modern warfare could only be the kind of stalemate that the world had seen in Manchuria, which would spell doom for Germany. Groener quoted a passage on this point from “War Today” that included Schlieffen’s answer to this impasse for outnumbered Germany. Attacking forces needed to outflank the enemy, and at the same time attack them in their front. The flanking forces had to be as strong as possible, and the forces attacking the front had to be as few as possible, without, however, being reduced to a mere holding role. New rapid-firing infantry weapons

79. Ibid, 10–11, 196.

would help in this task, as long as adequate preparations were made to keep the ammunition flowing. Indeed, ammunition supply lines formed a modern army's reserves. All men who earlier would have been held in reserve should now be used for the flanking attack, in order to make it as powerful as possible.⁸⁰

“These same thoughts,” Groener wrote, “which Schlieffen expressed publicly in 1909, we find already years earlier in the exercises, studies, and war games of the General Staff, but especially in . . . [Schlieffen's December 1905 memorandum].” Groener echoed the Reichsarchiv's official pronouncement on the significance of this document. It was “Schlieffen's military legacy [*Vermächtnis*] to his successor, the younger Moltke.” He characterized Schlieffen's proposal as an “operational plan” that represented the “most complete . . . application” of Schlieffen's “strategic ideas.” Indeed, in it Schlieffen had laid out his concept for a strong right wing to outflank and destroy the French and a left wing that engaged as many French with as few Germans as possible. “Schlieffen's plan was apparently too daring for the younger Moltke,” who decided to change the force ratio between the right and left flanks from 7:1 to 3:1. This change,

80. Ibid, 14–15. See Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17–18; Foley, *Schlieffen's Military Writings*, 200–1.

Groener wrote, represented a “fundamental” break with Schlieffen’s operational concept. “By amassing forces in Alsace and Lorraine, the danger was evoked that these troops would bash their heads against the French fortified front [*Festungsfront*], which is what happened.”⁸¹

Groener’s book had two explicit aims. The first was to argue that the plan outlined in Schlieffen’s December 1905 memorandum was viable and should have been followed in 1914. This argument included consideration of the mobilized Wilhelmine army’s force structure, the problem of England, and the fact that Schlieffen had proposed a plan for a one-front war in 1906 but Germany faced a two-front war in 1914. The book’s main purpose, however, was to show that Germany could have realized Schlieffen’s vision in 1914 even with the country’s less-than-ideal troop levels and Moltke’s problematic initial deployment. “It is certain,” Groener wrote, “that the great, powerful victory in Count Schlieffen’s sense was possible in August 1914 and was frustrated [*vereitelt*] solely by the shortcomings [*Unzulänglichkeit*] of the German leadership.”⁸² He aimed this sweeping criticism not only at Moltke, but also at the army commanders and their chiefs of staff, whom he collectively referred to by their institutional name,

81. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 15–16.

82. Ibid, 81.

the *Armee-Oberkommandos*. This theme also figured large in his second book, *Der Feldherr wider Willen* (The Unwilling Commander) (1930), which analyzed the initial mobile phase of the war under Moltke's leadership and followed a more pronounced pedagogical intent.

Before turning to his broad criticisms, it is important to note that his hagiographic catch phrases "secret of victory" and "recipe for victory" belied a clear understanding of the fluid, contingent nature of the early-twentieth-century battlefield. If he really believed these phrases, which was possible given the pedestal upon which he placed Schlieffen, he nonetheless did not think about military operations in simple mechanistic terms. He wrote of "unavoidable frictions of war."⁸³ His antebellum understanding of the roles of the supreme military commander and his subordinate commanders in fluid military operations still obtained, and indeed formed the basis of his criticism of Germany's wartime leadership. His prose was replete with conditional phrases. He considered multiple contingencies and their probabilities at each step, as he had been trained to do before the war. He was aware of the uncertainty of battle. As before the war, he expected the leadership values of willpower, decisiveness, and boldness to set the tone and overcome all adversity, within reason, for he was fully cognizant of the

83. Ibid, quote 23.

human costs of the modern battlefield, which placed real physical limits on what an army could do before combat consumed it. But his realism had limits. By now he was convinced not only that the plan could have produced results, but could have done so quickly. His references to “a few weeks” and “six weeks” till German forces should have crossed the Seine seem to have been due in part to literary license.⁸⁴ But the war had also driven home just how important time was, which encouraged him to think that because the war had to be short, it could be short. That said, he understood that great risks were involved, even if they were manageable. He sometimes used the word “hope.”⁸⁵

Leaving aside the problem of Moltke’s mental health, Groener’s main criticisms of his wartime leadership were two-fold. First, Moltke had squandered his forces by seeking victory both on the right wing and in Lorraine. The result had been that his right wing was not strong enough to fulfill its crucial operational function, while the left wing wasted time and strength running up against nearly impenetrable fortified positions. Second, Moltke had not even tried to keep his subordinate leaders on a tight leash

84. Ibid, 75, 200, 231, map 22; Wilhelm Groener, “Das kriegsgeschichtliche Werk des Reichsarchivs,” *Preussische Jahrbücher* 199.1 (1925), 50.

85. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 75; Groener, “Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft,” 68.

and ensure that they fought in a manner consistent with his operational goal. Instead he had set them loose on whatever was in front of them like so many hunting dogs.⁸⁶ Had his army commanders possessed something of the innate Feldherr qualities that Groener missed in Moltke, things might have still gone well, but that was not the case. In *Unwilling Commander*, Groener fleshed out their faults in a series of detailed operational studies. His criticisms centered on their insufficient appreciation of their part in the overall operational picture, their intermittent, usually inopportune insubordination, and their tendency to follow old habits and attack frontally instead of how Schlieffen had taught them, that is, by fixing the enemy on his front and enveloping him.

Groener contrasted Moltke's failure to exercise adequate control over his army commands with Schlieffen's opposing attitude.

Around Supreme Headquarters one was not fond of the high-handedness of the army commands, but shied away from stopping it. It is known of Count Schlieffen that he would have led the army with a strict, firm hand, without giving the independence of the subordinate commanders much room. From his writings also emerges that he did not rate their mental abilities very highly and above all thought their operational know-how was wanting, without which independence becomes an evil. Hence, there must have been a

86. I am borrowing this image of dogs with the scent of blood in their noses from Citino, who writes that German commanders attacked whenever they came near the enemy, but gave so little thought to their commander's overall purpose that Citino considers *Auftragstaktik* to have been a myth. Citino, *German Way of War*, 307–9.

deficiency in the preparation of the leadership. This deficiency made itself felt already right from the beginning of the war.⁸⁷

Groener asked,

whether in the selection of higher leaders and their helpers—completely apart from Moltke—mistakes occurred, such as easily occur during long periods of peace, especially with certain traditional notions . . . This question must be answered in the affirmative. The war itself has already given a clear enough answer.⁸⁸

He did not write what he meant by “traditional” views, although he was almost certainly referring to more than the mere privileging of nobles.

Before the war he had diplomatically criticized the principle of seniority and its resultant slow promotion process in an article in *Die Grenzboten*.⁸⁹ He might have also been thinking about D. von Malachowski’s book on tactics, *Scharfe Taktik und Revuetaktik im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (1892), which he recommended in his memoirs. Malachowski wrote, “the power of tradition is absolutely justifiable, the more so in the army, but when it stretches into the area of [tactical] forms and strives to hold on to these in the flow of events, it ends up in a conflict with the conditions and requirements of practical life.”⁹⁰ Traditions were important to the army’s

87. Groener, *Der Feldherr wider Willen*, 249–50.

88. Ibid, 246.

89. Groener, “Schaffung und Heranbildung der Führer für den Krieg.” See Chapter 3 above.

90. Malachowski, *Scharfe Taktik und Revuetaktik*, iii; Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 59.

identity, but under no circumstances could they be permitted to impede the army's military effectiveness.⁹¹

Groener pointed out in *Schlieffen's Testament* that the army had not been Schlieffen's in the way that it should have. The Feldherr fought best with an instrument steeped in his spirit, but Schlieffen had not possessed such a thing.⁹² Groener also wrote,

The selection of leaders, not only the higher commanders, but also the lower-ranking ones, is a story all to itself. Who wanted to doubt that in the German army splendid leadership material was available? It just had to be brought out. The intellectual development of the whole people offered the guarantee for reliability, adroitness, and bravery. Various factors hampering good leadership selection lay in tradition. Not even among active officers did one make sure that each officer was systematically trained for the next higher leadership position, the lieutenant for company commander, the captain for battalion commander, the major for regimental commander. . . . What was true of the officers' training was even more of a problem for the noncommissioned officers. Actually, one saw in them only the carriers of the drill in the barracks courtyard.

Of course things had been worse on the French and Russian side, he wrote, but Germany's numeric weakness had demanded that it cultivate its qualitative advantages to the fullest extent possible.⁹³ Groener's comments

91. Groener's school friend and fellow Württemberg officer published a book about the German army's weaknesses. Gerold von Gleich, *Die alte Armee und ihre Verirrungen: Eine kritische Studie*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: K. F. Koehler, 1919). Gleich had apparently been more skeptical than Groener about Germany's chances of success in a two-front war, but he shared with Groener a distaste for any traditionalism that impeded the army's effectiveness.

92. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 195–96; Schlieffen, "Der Feldherr," Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:4

93. Groener, *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen*, 199. See also his friend's opinions on the state of the Wilhelmine officer corps: Gleich, *Die alte Armee*.

about the state of the German people's intellectual development recalled the Wilhelmine discourse about the "nobility of character," but he also had the seniority principle in mind when he used the word "traditions" in a negative sense. Unfortunately, he did not explore this subject further. The requirements of camaraderie from the Wilhelmine era had survived the revolution, if somewhat the worse for wear. A civil tone and some discretion were still necessary, especially at the time of his second book, when he was Secretary of Defense.⁹⁴

Groener returned to the theme of the missing Feldherr in his conclusions, not simply because that is where ultimate responsibility lay, but because he believed that only a commander with native talents could operate in the fog of war.

In the uncertainty of war . . . errors prevail, which are only overcome by the divine weapon of genius. Hence we must abstain from all accusations and admit that the soul of the true Feldherr was missing from the leadership of the German army before and in the Battle of the Marne. We have attempted to penetrate the mistakes to which

94. When and how polite forms of camaraderie were still observed requires further study. I have noticed shifting limits in the tone of critical reviews of Groener's books; BA-MA, N46/D. The subject can also be examined through the plethora of officer's organizations, including the prestigious *Schlieffen-Vereinigung* (Schlieffen Society) for former General Staff officers. Theo Schwarzmüller, *Zwischen Kaiser und "Führer": Generalfeldmarschall August von Mackensen: Eine politische Biographie* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996), 224–27; related correspondence in the Mackensen Papers, BA-MA, N39/332–37, 340–45. Also interesting are the political and policy disputes in which officers took opposing sides of an issue. The most extreme cases involved men on the far right, such as Ludendorff, as well as pacifists, who other officers treated as no longer honorable. Wolfram Wette, ed., *Pazifistische Offiziere in Deutschland 1871–1933* (Bremen: Donat, 1999).

the German supreme command and army commanders were subject. That is an easy task in comparison to making decisions in the reality of war.⁹⁵

But Groener also followed up on his discussion of the independence of subordinate commanders in war by trying to establish where the boundary between “obedience” and “intellectual freedom” lay. His explanation encapsulated his own self-concept, which informed both his military and civilian careers.

Unconditional obedience is the solid rock upon which every army must be founded, if it wants to amount to anything. All the same, there are distinctions in obedience. Every leader can be caught in a difficult crisis of conscience when he cannot carry out the order given to him, because of a change in the situation or because of false assumptions when the order was issued. Then he acts according to his own independent decision and carries full responsibility with all its consequences.

Officers should act according to their own conscience when necessary, but also accept complete responsibility for their decisions. Groener then entered the realm of General Staff metaphysics that was supposed to overcome the difficulties of command, control, and communication inherent on the vast expanses of the modern battlefield.

In order to make the right choice with lightening speed and tact of judgement, the leader requires the utmost intellectual freedom. Nothing may check him. He is led by an inner light. Under this group of leadership qualities we understand all the forces of the mind and character that convey a high personality value, that make one truly independent of all outside constraints.

95. Groener, *Der Feldherr wider Willen*, 244.

Groener realized that this statement “would seem strange” to some readers, since soldiers had to obey. “But is it not the ultimate intensification [*höchste Steigerung*] of obedience, when the subordinate commander already carried out the order of the Feldherr before it reached him?”⁹⁶ Groener was demanding the same freedom for subordinate commanders that he felt the army commands should not have had in 1914. This apparent inconsistency was due to the central role that independent thought and action played in his own self-concept and the Wilhelmine General Staff more generally. He was willing to give responsible freedom of action to other, equally gifted officers.

In short, Groener was advocating the ideals of directive command and independent responsibility that he had learned in the General Staff.⁹⁷ He believed they were necessary for the next generation of officers, because one could not count on having a true Feldherr when one was needed. He also believed that training officers thus helped to create the conditions from which a Feldherr was more likely to arise. This solution to the nature

96. Ibid, 249.

97. On these lessons see Meckel, *Allgemeine Lehre*, 3–8, 276; Woide, *Die Ursachen der Siege und Niederlagen*; Foley, “Preparing the German Army,” 17–20. Citino’s rejection of Auftragstaktik as a reality in the German officer corps focuses on what happened on the battlefield, not on General Staff officers’s training and aspirations. Citino, *German Way of War*. His interpretation comports with Groener’s criticism of the army commands’ actual performance, but not with Groener’s expectation of what should have happened.

versus nurture dilemma helped him to resolve the apparent contradiction between his belief in inborn military-political genius and the significance to which he attributed his own General Staff training. Both were prerequisite to fighting the kind of war Schlieffen had wanted to see. Schlieffen himself had written that the Feldherr of innate genius also had to cultivate his military talents.⁹⁸

Groener's understanding of the campaign in August and September 1914 was informed by the leadership concept he had acquired in Schlieffen's General Staff. This concept also informed his work as Defense Minister.⁹⁹ He used this position to continue expanding the influence of his General Staff ideals on the current officer corps. To this end he commissioned a book in January 1931 to mark Schlieffen's 100th birthday and honor the achievements of the General Staff from 1806 to 1906.

The book should treat not only the General Staff's own intellectual development with respect to operational and tactical opinions, but in addition also show which determinate influence the General Staff has exercised on the training and education of troop commanders and commanders' helpmates, as well as on the tactical training of the troops themselves. It should be shown, how the army's intellectual life always received fresh nourishment from the General Staff. The influence of the General Staff on domestic and international politics should also be described in a faultless

98. Schlieffen, "Der Feldherr," Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.

99. For Groener's policies while Minister of Defense, see Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener*; Citino, *Evolution of Blitzkrieg Tactics*, 144–97; Geyer, *Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit*; F. L. Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics 1918 to 1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 290–350.

historical narrative, as should its role in the Wars of Liberation and the German Wars of Unification. It should be shown how the General Staff always advocated an army organization and a defense system that gave the fatherland the necessary measure of security, just as it always campaigned for modern armaments and equipment for the army.¹⁰⁰

These comments were especially interesting in light of his remarks in *Schlieffen's Testament* in 1927 about the real limits of Schlieffen's ability to shape the army with which he would have gone to war. But this proposed book was to be an exercise in tradition-building, not historical or operational analysis.¹⁰¹ His belief in the fundamental reality and viability of the Schlieffen Plan had been real enough, but in the memorandum he wrote commissioning this book, he expressed other concerns. He wanted to see the book cast the General Staff in a positive light and thereby ensure its influence on the continuing development of Germany's armed forces. He did not need to "invent" the Schlieffen Plan to achieve this goal, but its existence—if not its failure—comported with this goal.

100. Memorandum from the Reichswehrminister, 212/31 WIIIb, Berlin, 23 Jan. 1931, in Boetticher Papers, BA-MA, N323/49. The book appeared after Groener left office: Friedrich Cochenhausen, ed., *Von Scharnhorst zu Schlieffen 1806–1906: Hundert Jahre preussisch-deutscher Generalstab* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1933).

101. On the instrumental use of tradition, see Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Rander, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Donald Abenheim, *Reforging the Iron Cross: The Search for Tradition in the West German Armed Forces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Groener's war entailed extensive experience not only with military operations, but also the home-front, where he saw severe material and manpower shortages undermine Germany's ability to fight the war indefinitely, and he experienced the inability of the country's civilian and military leadership to master the situation. While Groener appreciated the enormous superiority in resources with which Germany's enemies had crushed it, he continually returned to issues of leadership after the war. As a General Staff officer, he had been trained to act and succeed despite bad odds, and he expected the same of the rest of Germany's military and civilian leadership.

Groener devoted considerable space in his postwar publications to discussing the weaknesses of Germany's domestic policy-making and administrative machinery, but for him everything always went back to the army's operations in August and September 1914. He placed much of the blame for Germany's defeat on the failure of commanders to fight as Schlieffen had taught them. Moltke's war plan and army were far from perfect in 1914, but Groener believed they could have brought the war to a

successful conclusion, if Moltke and his subordinate commanders had kept uppermost in their minds the main operational logic of the Schlieffen-inspired plan that they were executing. Specifically, Groener argued that Moltke should have emphasized a strong right wing and not allowed himself to be distracted by the possibility of success elsewhere on the front. He should have held his leaders under stricter control, especially since they themselves did not seem to understand the war plan and instead each went after those forces directly in front of them with little or no regard for the overall operational implications of such actions.

Zuber accuses Groener and other members of the so-called Schlieffen School of having invented the Schlieffen Plan in order to preserve the General Staff's reputation after Germany had lost the war. While it is clear that Groener's Schlieffen writings were also an exercise in hagiography, Groener did not invent the Schlieffen Plan. The previous chapter shows how he already began talking about it in September 1914, over four years prior to Germany's capitulation. This chapter shows the evolution in his understanding of the plan that occurred after he had studied Schlieffen's December 1905 memorandum in detail. Zuber's discomfort with Groener's Schlieffen Plan advocacy is nonetheless understandable, because phrases such as "secret of victory" and "recipe for victory" had little to do with the

reality of war or General Staff war plans. Groener manipulated Schlieffen's image, as he tried to elevate him to the level of Napoleon and Bismarck. This was probably an unconscious process, however, insofar as Groener had already put Schlieffen on a pedestal before the fighting had even begun in 1914, and the experience of the World War only increased Schlieffen's brilliance in his mind. Only as minister of defense did Groener consciously turn to tradition-building. This work included a Schlieffen of mythological proportions, but in Groener's mind this mythological Schlieffen had really existed.

Conclusion

The Imperial German army officer corps appears in a large body of historiography as noble or noble-dominated, atavistic, and unprofessional. This scholarship uses the shorthand “feudal” and “feudalization” to describe this phenomenon. In other studies, the same officer corps appears as a group of consummate professionals whose experience serves as a model for understanding military professionalism in more recent settings. This dissertation examines the military career of one man, Wilhelm Groener, in reference to both bodies of research. Groener’s career is significant, because it embodied two apparent paradoxes related to both sides of this interpretive divide. First, Groener was a commoner who pursued a successful career. To what extent was his career an anomaly? And did he shed his bourgeois cultural orientations, as the feudalization interpretation presupposes? Second, he experienced the First World War as a “total war,” but he felt that Schlieffen’s narrow operational teachings offered the most important lessons about the war. Why? Did his attitude have something to do with the professionalism that the other body of scholarship emphasizes? What was his understanding of officering and war?

This study has found that Groener's career was exceptional, but not anomalous. The course it followed in peacetime up to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and the position of section chief in the General Staff lay within the logic of the officer corps' and General Staff's promotion process and career ladders. In the Wilhelmine army officer corps, the principles of social background, seniority, and merit coexisted in a flexible enough tension to allow talented men to pursue successful careers. If many regiments were too exclusive for a man like Groener, others had room for him. Germany's diverse social and regional makeup ensured that the odds were not stacked against him, as long as he was not a Social Democrat, Jew, member of the working class, or petit bourgeois with no history of family service to the state above the rank of non-commissioned officer.¹ Within the Württemberg context, his social background was more than adequate at the time of his enrollment, although Württemberg became more exclusive in the last two decades before the war. In fact, Groener's outsider status has been somewhat exaggerated in the Württemberg context, insofar as his father had served the state his entire adult life and in his capacity as paymaster

1. See also Dennis E. Showalter, "No Officer Rather than a Bad Officer': Officer Selection and Education in the Prussian/German Army, 1715–1945," in *Military Education: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Gregory C. Kennedy and Keith Neilson (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 44–45.

had held a modest position within the Württemberg active lists for officers, military doctors, veterinarians, and officials.²

Historiographical assertions that bourgeois officers were “feudalized” assume that being bourgeois and being an officer were mutually exclusive conditions. Groener’s tastes comported with what the historiography has identified as typically bourgeois, and yet he also identified strongly with his military profession. It was possible to be both a commoner and an officer without adopting a noble world view, assuming one can even talk about a monolithic noble culture in such a diverse country. Groener’s bourgeois social background coexisted easily with his concept of officering, but the former does not appear to have determined the latter. Groener’s self-concept as an officer stemmed from the professional military culture in which he was socialized. One might argue that he embraced his profession more strongly than some noblemen, insofar as his social capital stemmed exclusively from his secondary education and military career, not from a long family history of rule and military service, upon which many nobles could draw. In many ways, Groener was what he did, but this circumstance was hardly unique to the bourgeoisie. Even noble officers with long family

2. Königliches Statistisches Landesamt, *Hof- und Staats-Handbuch des Königreichs Württemberg 1889* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1889), 283.

memories could identify with their profession.³ Groener's whole-hearted adoption of his profession did not amount to "feudalization."

Groener was a member of an elite group within the officer corps, the General Staff, which was supposed to lead in war, but which could only exercise indirect influence on the field army in peacetime, largely through military exercises, military publications, the rotation of its officers through positions in the field army, and the exemplary comportment of its officers. It expanded its influence further as a growing number of officers who had passed through the War Academy and General Staff became commanders. Moreover, all commanders at the divisional level and higher had a chief of staff from the General Staff who shared responsibility with them in a system of dual command. The General Staff's imprint on the army as a whole was significant, but partial. Nonetheless, the General Staff determined the army's ultimate fate, for it prepared the war plan that shaped the army's initial deployment, and it directed the overall course of operations in the war.

3. Noble families' strategic use of memory: Marcus Funck and Stephan Malinowski, "Masters of Memory: The Strategic Use of Autobiographical Memory by the German Nobility," in *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture*, ed. Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 86–103.

General Staff officers' elite status and command functions fostered in them a heightened sense of their value as leaders that extended beyond their specialized functions in the General Staff. Groener saw himself not as a military-technical expert in the operational use of railroads, but as an officer who also possessed these essential war-making skills. All of his antebellum articles exhibited the centrality of officering for his self-concept. Officering in peacetime meant making and training soldiers and officers for war. Besides imparting military discipline, knowledge of tactics and weapons, and other skills necessary for military life, officers had to cultivate in their subordinates what Groener called the "warrior spirit"—an attitude of selfless patriotism that did not shrink before danger. Groener's self-concept as an officer also included a willingness—even eagerness—to shoulder responsibility for a situation, act without waiting for orders, and accept the consequences. This attitude existed in a mutually reinforcing relationship with his concept of war, in which strong, able, and inspired leadership made the difference between success and failure.

The General Staff existed to plan and fight wars, whose occurrence it considered natural and inevitable. It understood war in terms of mobile operations leading to decisive battles of annihilation and terms dictated by the victor. Passively waiting to see what the enemy did and then reacting

with measures designed merely to ensure survival and an acceptable negotiated settlement was unthinkable. Instead one had to dictate the logic and pace of events; one had to force the enemy to react to one's own actions. This requirement was especially valid in a situation where one was outnumbered, which was expected to be the case in the coming war against France, Russia, and possibly Great Britain. Indeed, because the General Staff believed that the next war would be against a vastly superior coalition, it developed a plan that was supposed to ensure the rapid defeat of France before Germany turned its forces on Russia. If all went well, if its planning and training were thorough and the General Staff and troop commanders were at the top of their games, Germany could defeat France, its most dangerous enemy, before the war became attritional and, therefore, unwinnable.

The General Staff's plan became known as the Schlieffen Plan, because Schlieffen first proposed its general outlines: an attack on France's eastern border with enough forces to hold down the French; simultaneously, an immediate, massive, and deep invasion of Belgium and then northern France, in order to circumvent France's strong eastern fortifications and pursue and destroy French forces no matter what defensive positions they occupied; meanwhile, an active defense against Russia with as few forces as

possible, until France had been definitively dispatched and Germany could focus its efforts on Russia. Terence Zuber has recently challenged the existence of this plan, claiming that Groener and other General Staff officers invented the Schlieffen Plan after the war in order to scapegoat Moltke and deflect attention from the General Staff's failure. This dissertation suggests, however, that the plan was real enough. Besides drawing on other recent historiography to address Zuber's sometimes faulty evidence and reasoning, this study shows that Groener's prewar writings exhibited an image of war that comported with the Schlieffen Plan. Moreover, August and September 1914 found him comparing the course of German operations to Schlieffen's intentions—over four years before Germany's defeat.

The Schlieffen Plan envisioned a short war, although not necessarily as short as Groener and other Schlieffen advocates maintained after 1918, and not in as mechanical a fashion as postwar hagiographic stereotypes of a “secret” or “recipe for victory” suggested. The Schlieffen Plan aimed for a short war, because that was Germany's only chance of winning. Groener and other officers believed that they could accomplish the job against all odds, because they had to accomplish it. This state of mind was fostered by German military culture's imperative to succeed. This telling motivation

offered a crucial example of how military professionalism and military effectiveness were not synonymous. General Staff officers were consummate professionals, but the ideas they learned through their professional acculturation were sometimes at odds with objective requirements of military effectiveness. Thus, while the feudal interpretation of the officer corps is wrong, Wilhelmine military culture illustrates the limits of opposing functional interpretations of military professionalism that rely on the Prussian-German example as a generalizable model.

When Germany's mobile operations failed to defeat France in 1914, Groener and his comrades refused to follow the logic of the Schlieffen Plan and conclude that pursuing the war further made no sense. By that point Groener saw the war in mythic terms as a great struggle for survival. The war had become an epic all-or-nothing match that eventually cost the monarchy its existence and crippled the army and officer corps. This process entailed massive economic, material, and labor shortages and disruptions on the home-front, which rocked and eventually undermined the stability of the state. Groener had a front-row seat to these events in 1916–17, when he was head of the new War Office, an agency that tried to coordinate Germany's short supply of labor, materials, and food with the needs of war industry and the field army. He gained even more political experience as

First General Quartermaster during and after the revolution, when he played an instrumental role in the Kaiser's abdication and the republic's acceptance of the terms of the Versailles Treaty. Nonetheless, after the war, he became one of the most vocal advocates of Schlieffen's operational teachings, which on the face of things ignored the war's broad political and economic context.

The shape of the Schlieffen Plan that he described changed somewhat over the years, as he gained access to and studied the original documents; however, his main message was constant. For Groener the war represented not a refutation of Schlieffen's operational plan and teachings, but a demonstration of their validity. Schlieffen had understood the economic and political ramifications of a war of attrition, and, therefore, had prescribed a short war, for which he trained his General Staff officers in countless military exercises. Groener argued that had the army's leaders followed Schlieffen's plan and fought the way Schlieffen had taught them, Germany could have won the war and escaped the hardship and humiliation that accompanied defeat. Groener's adherence to the Schlieffen Plan represented not a rejection of the "total war" he had experienced, but an answer to it. This attitude was difficult to accept after the Second World War, when once again overwhelming material superiority crushed Germany and brought its

battlefield excellence to naught. From this perspective, Groener's interpretation became even more perplexing. Why could he not at least entertain the possibility that Germany's defeat had been inevitable? Groener's military professionalism did not permit him to think this way. While he appreciated the significance of material and technological factors in war, he focussed on the human element, especially with respect to leadership. That was the primary lesson he had learned and taught in the Wilhelmine officer corps, even as he grappled with railroad timetables. That was why he placed Schlieffen on such a high pedestal.

Appendix

Table 1: Social origins of officer candidates in Prussian war schools

	Active and inactive officers*	Officials, ministers, lawyers, professors, doctors†	Estate owners	Estate lease- holders, estate managers	Business- men, factory owners	Minor officials, NCOs	Others with independ- ent means	Total
1888	252 30.3%	235 28.2%	147 17.6%	20 2.4%	79 9.5%	59 7.1%	41 4.9%	833
1899	342 32.2%	307 28.9%	131 12.3%	40 3.8%	122 11.5%	20 1.9%	100 9.4%	1062
1903	295 32.9%	303 33.8%	96 10.7%	12 1.3%	128 14.3%	19 2.1%	44 4.9%	897
1904	338 34.4%	279 28.4%	100 10.2%	24 2.4%	161 16.4%	31 3.1%	50 5.1%	983
1905	267 27.9%	329 34.3%	99 10.3%	30 3.1%	148 15.4%	46 4.8%	39 4.1%	958
1906	261 28.5%	282 30.8%	111 12.1%	18 2%	146 15.9%	25 2.7%	73 8%	916
1907	303 32.9%	270 29.3%	93 10.1%	18 2%	143 15.5%	37 4%	56 6.1%	920
1908	271 29.9%	279 30.8%	83 9.2%	22 2.4%	155 17.1%	34 3.7%	63 6.9%	907
1909	294 30% [34%]	319 33% [30%]	95 10%	17 2%	152 15% [14%]	48 5%	49 5%	974 [1024]
1910	263 25% [29%]	369 35% [34%]	85 8% [9%]	28 3% [2%]	184 18% [16%]	53 5% [4%]	65 6%	1047 [1136]
1911	319 26% [29%]	450 37% [34%]	93 8%	26 2%	186 15%	64 5%	90 7%	1228 [1318]
1912	290 25% [28%]	471 40% [37%]	93 8%	20 2%	182 15%	56 5% [4%]	69 5% [6%]	1181 [1245]
1913	279 24% [28%]	459 39% [37%]	107 9%	28 2%	183 16% [15%]	49 4%	70 6% [5%]	1175 [1336]

Source: Demeter, *Das deutsche Heer*, 31; Bald, *Der deutsche Generalstab*, 112.

Note: Numbers in brackets are from Bald's revised figures.

*Includes ruling houses and mediatized princes.

†Demeter includes military doctors with this group of university educated professionals. Bald, on the other hand, locates military doctors with the officers. Inexplicably, however, he leaves Demeter's numbers unchanged in this respect. This was perhaps an error on his part, but it also comports with the fragmentary nature of the source material.

Table 2: Social composition of twenty Prussian regiments and battalions in 1912

Unit	Location	Nobles	Commoners
1st Foot Guards Regiment	Potsdam	86*	0
2nd Foot Guards Regiment	Berlin	67	1
Grenadier Regiment Count Kleist von Nollendorf (1st West Prussian) No. 6	Posen	19	37
Grenadier Regiment Prince Carl von Preussen (2nd Brandenburg) No. 12	Frankfurt a.O.	26	30
Infantry Regiment von Horn (3rd Rhineland) No. 29	Trier	8	46
Lower Rhine Fusilier Regiment No. 39	Düsseldorf	11	47
Infantry Regiment von Boyen (5th East Prussian) No. 41	Tilsit & Memel	3	47
Infantry Regiment Prince Moritz von Anhalt-Dessau (5th Pommeranian) No. 42	Stralsund & Greifswald	11	44
6th Rhineland Infantry Regiment 68	Coblenz	6	49
Hamburg Infantry Regiment (2nd Hanseatic) No. 76	Hamburg	24	21
Oldenburg Infantry Regiment No. 91	Oldenburg	43	7
4th Baden Infantry Regiment Prince Wilhelm No. 112	Mühlhausen (Alsace)	3	52
Husar Regiment King Wilhelm I (1st Rhineland)	Bonn	22	0
2nd Rhineland Husar Regiment No. 9	Strassbourg	6	21
1st East Prussian Field Artillery Regiment No. 16	Königsberg	4	30
1st Thuringian Field Artillery Regiment No. 19	Erfurt	0	29
1st Grand Ducal Hessian Field Artillery Regiment No. 25	Darmstadt	25	4
Guards Pioneer Battalion	Berlin	7	16
Magdeburg Pioneer Battalion No. 4	Magdeburg	0	23
Railroad Regiment No. 1	Berlin	5	41

Source: *Rangliste der Königlich Preussischen Armee*, 1912.

Note: Social composition was determined by the presence or lack of a noble predicate in the published active lists. Hence, this table draws no distinctions between the old nobility and the recently ennobled. Officers *à la Suite*, that is, honorary members of a regiment, are not included in these statistics. Nor are military doctors and paymasters.

*Includes eight princes.

Table 3: Social character of German officer corps by regiment, 1910

Units	Noble	Noble majority (up to 2/3)	Bourgeois majority (up to 2/3)	Bourgeois
216 Infantry Regiments	19	21	26	150
18 Rifle Battalions	6	3	2	7
101 Cavalry Regiments	50	16	25	10
94 Field Artillery Regiments	6	6	7	75
18 Foot Artillery Regiments	0	0	1	17
29 Pioneer Battalions	0	0	1	28
13 Transport Battalions	0	0	0	13
23 Supply Battalions	0	0	0	23

Source: "Zusammensetzung der deutschen Offizierkorps," *Schwäbischer Merkur*, 7 March 1910, clipping in HStAS M 1/3, Bü 792, fol. 29. The author used the *Deutsche Rangliste*, published by G. Stalling, to tabulate these results.

Table 4: Nobles and commoners in the Prussian officer corps, 1909

Rank	Number of commoners	Number of nobles	Percentage of nobles
Field Marshalls and Colonel Generals	0	2	100%
Generals of the Infantry	2	30	93.8%
General Lieutenants	7	44	86.3%
General Majors	31	75	70.8%
Colonels	65	139	68.1%
Lieutenant Colonels	105	109	50.9%
Majors	512	501	49.5%
Captains	1522	945	38.3%
First Lieutenants	1467	631	30.1%
Second Lieutenants	2949	1252	29.8 %

Source: Gädke, "Die Bevorzugung des Adels im Heere," [*Berliner Tageblatt*, February 1909], clipping in HStAS M1/3, Bü 629, fol. 14.

Table 5: Officers of the Third Württemberg Infantry Regiment 121, 1884–86

Name and Rank	Father's Occupation	Confession	Education
Colonel Hugo Freiherr von Lupin <i>commander until 1885</i>	Higher official (Royal Bavarian <i>Oberbergrath</i>)	Protestant	Gymnasium
Colonel Emil Robert von Hartrott <i>commander after 1885</i> (from the Prussian Army)	Gentleman of private means	Protestant	Realschule
Lieutenant Colonel Wilhelm Freiherr Seutter von Loetzen	Head Forester	Protestant	Gymnasium
Major Karl von Ruoff	Court Notary	Protestant	Gymnasium (Abitur), some university
Major Christian Kallenberger	Staff Sergeant in the Royal Honor Disabled Corps	Protestant	Obergymnasium
Major von Goez	?	?	?
Major Heinrich Schmitt (à la suite*)	Officer (captain)	Catholic	Realschule
Captain Hans Sonntag	Officer (retired colonel)	?	Gymnasium
Captain Gustav Krieg	Professor	Protestant	Gymnasium and Lyceum
Captain Egmont Nagel	Lawyer	Protestant	Gymnasium (Abitur), some university
Captain Julius Steiner	Official (<i>Oberamtsdiener</i>)	Protestant	Realschule
First Lieutenant Max von Wussow (made captain in this period)	Officer (retired captian) and official (<i>Kreiskassenrendant</i>)	Protestant	Gymnasium, cadet school in Berlin
First Lieutenant Karl von Raben (made captain in this period)	Officer (retired major)	Protestant	Obergymnasium
First Lieutenant Friedrich Kinzelbach	Higher official (Royal <i>Kanzleirath</i>)	Protestant	Gymnasium, cadet school in Ludwigsburg
First Lieutenant Louis Pfundt	Administrative official	Protestant	Gymnasium and Oberrealschule
First Lieutenant Hermann Fritz	Town mayor	Protestant	Realschule, technical school
Second Lieutenant Maximillian Faber	Higher official (<i>Kanzleirat</i> and <i>Kanzleivorstand</i> of the Royal State Court, Stuttgart)	Protestant	Lyceum, cadet school

continued on next page

Table 5 continued

Name and Rank	Father's Occupation	Confession	Education
Second Lieutenant Alfred Eduard von Roschmann	Officer (from a military family dating back to the Napoleonic Wars; married to a woman with same background)	Protestant	Gymnasium, Obergymnasium (Abitur)
Second Lieutenant Gustav Jäger	Dr. phil.	Protestant	Gymnasium, Realgymnasium
Second Lieutenant Albert Ringler	Officer (retired general)	Protestant	Gymnasium
Second Lieutenant Eugen Hummel	Senior civil servant	Catholic	Cadet school in Lichterfeld
Second Lieutenant Rudolf Knoblauch	School teacher	Protestant	Lyceum
Second Lieutenant Christoph von Ebbinghaus <i>patent of nobility entered in his records at a later, unknown date</i>	Owner of an estate and a paper factory	Protestant	Lyceum
Second Lieutenant Albert Pasquay	Factory owner and member of the Regional Council of Alsace Lorraine	Protestant	Gymnasium, Realgymnasium (Abitur)
Second Lieutenant Karl Breyer	Officer (regimental commander; War Ministry official)	Protestant	Cadet school in Lichterfeld
Second Lieutenant Wilhelm Groener	Lower military official (paymaster)	Protestant	Gymnasium
Second Lieutenant Karl Burger	Merchant and factory owner	Protestant	Gymnasium
Second Lieutenant Theodor Freiherr von Schellerer	Officer (retired major from the Bavarian army)	Catholic	Gymnasium
Second Lieutenant Reinhold Lägeler	Judge (<i>Oberamtsrichter</i>)	?	Gymnasium

Sources: Stammliste 1907, HStAS, M92, bu. 2; Personalakten I, HStAS, M430/1, 353, 758, 1043, 1321, 1395, 1451, 1541, 1698, 2073, 2273, 2429, 2684; Personalakten II, HStAS, M430/2, 240, 393, 459, 695, 952, 968, 1194, 1337, 1502, 1594, 1650, 1724, 1751, 1824, 2001, 2030, 2451.

Note: This data covers the period from Groener's entry as a Fähnrich to his being commissioned a second lieutenant. Those officers already deceased before 1907 were not compiled in the regimental list from which this information stems.

* The designation *à la suite* referred to an officer who was a member of the regiment in an honorary capacity.

Table 6: Organization of the Great General Staff before the Great War

CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF

Chief Quartermaster I

2nd Section (deployment and operations)

Railroad Section

4th Section (foreign forts)

Section 1a (revision of military transport order)

Chief Quartermaster II

3rd Section (France with Morocco, England with Egypt, Afghanistan)

9th Section (Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, America, German colonies)

Chief Quartermaster III

5th Section (Operational Studies)

8th Section (War Academy, General Staff Duties)

Chief Quartermaster IV

1st Section (Russia, Northern states, East Asia, Persia, Turkey)

10th Section (Austria-Hungary, Balkan states)

Chief Quartermaster V

Military History Section I (modern wars)

Archive

Library

Chief of Mapmaking

Trigonometric Section

Topographic Section

Cartographic Section

Photogrammetric Section

Colonial Section

Directly subordinate to the Chief of the General Staff:

Central Section (General Staff personnel, organization, and administration) with Section IIIb (intelligence)

6th Section (maneuvers)

Military History Section II (older wars)

Source: Schmidt-Richberg, "Die Generalstäbe in Deutschland," 34. Detailed charts of the continuing growth of the General Staff and evolution of its organization: "Die Organisation des Grossen Generalstabes [1803–1914]," BA-MA, Freiburg i.Br., PH3/124.

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